

May 2017
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May 1, 2017 – Looking Forward by Looking Back

There is no doubt in my mind that many people are experiencing some level of anxiety over the rate of change in the world today. A half century ago, the Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan, peppering his arguments with quotes from thinkers as diverse as Shakespeare and the economist John Kenneth Galbraith and religious leaders such as Cardinal Newman, observed that the rate of change is accelerating. Like other writers of the 1960's and 1970's some of his predictions about the future, in which we now are living, were remarkably accurate.

In one of his experiments in video, McLuhan uses the image of the rear-view mirror of a car to discuss the human tendency to experience the future by way of the past. In the video the camera shows mostly the rear view mirror of the car. In the rear view mirror there is the silhouette of a horse-drawn buggy. The narrator explains, "The past went that-a-way." McLuhan goes on to say, "We look at the present through a rear view mirror. We march backwards into the future." The image was strong enough that I remember it all of these years later. I think, however, that it is more meaningful to me these days than it was when I was younger and reading McLuhan's ideas for the first time.

I have a significant number of conversations with people who speak with a degree of longing for the past. They are aware of the highly visual, fragmented and hyper specialized culture in which we live and long for a simpler, more community-minded time. They bemoan the advances in technology and long for the times before certain technologies dominated our communications. I am particularly sensitive to these conversations, because I share some of the nostalgia for the way things used to be.

It is possible that my thinking about Marshall McLuhan in the context of the rapid pace of today's world is an excellent example of one of the principles to which he referred in his book. We still think in categories a half century old when interpreting the realities of today.

Probably the most famous of McLuhan's books is *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, which examines how the advent of print revolutionized human perception and crafted the world in which he was writing his book. Known as a futurist, McLuhan took a careful look not at the technology of his 20th century, but rather at how the 20th century was shaped by a 15th century innovation. Media advanced and it took art and culture 500 years to catch up and recognize what had happened.

I suppose that it is possible that I live in a similar bubble. Digital technology is so revolutionary and has advanced to a point where it will take our culture some time to catch up. We see signs of this revolution all the time. Engineers are technically capable of creating autonomous driver-less vehicles for all kinds of work from detecting and dealing with explosive devices to delivering packages to our homes. Driver-less cars

and trucks are beginning to appear on our highways and it is reasonable to expect that soon they will be common. These technical advances are amazing and powerful, but it seems that our philosophies and ethics haven't caught up with the new challenges such technical advances create for relationships, how we view work, and other aspects of life.

In a manner that is reminiscent of the way industrial production lines drove craftsmen out of work, we are experiencing a technical revolution that renders many contemporary jobs obsolete. Whether the operation is a clothing factory or a coal mine, it simply doesn't need the workforce that was required a few years ago. Jobs that once were the staple of middle class income no longer exist. The workplace of the future is so far advanced from the skills of many contemporary workers that it feels like not only are the jobs disappearing but that the purpose of human living is being diminished as well.

No wonder people are anxious.

No wonder people long for a past.

The problem is that those who promise a return to the way things used to be cannot keep those promises. Basing our political decisions on that longing for the past is a guaranteed way to become disappointed and disillusioned with our policy makers. They may promise to return us to the former ways, but there will be no such return.

McLuhan himself was a product of the era of the book. Although he was beginning to anticipate the digital revolution, the transition that we have experienced away from print as the mode of communication has been swift and nearly complete in the years since the end of his life. Just as the invention of the printing press more than 500 years ago changed the way societies organized and gave rise to modern democracies, the digital revolution promises to change how we organize ourselves for life and government in the future. Our imaginations may be too limited for us to fully perceive all that is occurring.

We might start by envisioning a new literacy. In the digital world, learning to read and write is insufficient. Those who are successful in the generation of our grandchildren must be fluent in coding software to work the machines of their time. Schools will need to revise curricula and engage in entirely new ways of sharing teaching and learning with students in order to prepare students for employment in the digital world.

I continue to be struck by the memory of that McLuhan film. I resolved at that time not to become one of the people who goes through life longing for a fading past while a whole new world is unfolding in the larger screen of the windshield (to use McLuhan's analogy). As I grow older, however, I am aware that I do gain a certain perspective from at least occasionally glancing at the past. I need to be aware that the entire analogy belongs to the past. I am no longer the driver of my own car, but rather the passenger in a car driven by advanced technology the control of which I only partially understand.

To embrace the future I will need, at bare minimum, a few new analogies.

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May 2, 2017 – Festivals

Our children experienced two family moves in their growing up years. The first, from North Dakota to Idaho, occurred when they were 2 and 4 years old and didn't seem to cause much trauma. They got into the excitement of the adventure and took turns riding in the U-Haul truck as we made our way to our new home. They seemed to quickly fit into the new home and routine. It was a somewhat bigger challenge for them when they were 12 and 14, moving from Idaho to South Dakota. We moved during the summer vacation from school, but changing schools was a big deal. They had to form new friendships and for new routines for their lives.

Both of our children have moved a lot more since they grew up and moved out of our home. Our son moved from Oregon to California, back to Oregon, to North Carolina and then to Washington. Those big moves criss-crossed the nation just a couple of years apart. Our daughter has lived in Wyoming, Montana, England, Missouri and Japan, with a couple of stints back in South Dakota along the way. It is a pattern that parallels their parents. We did a lot more moving around during our young adult years. We had seven or eight different apartments between the time we married and the time we settled into our first parish.

The result of all of this mobility, however, is that we live with considerable distances between us. That means that travel is a big part of our lives and a high priority for our financial resources. That is fine with us. We enjoy traveling and like to see new places and do new things.

We also enjoy hearing about the places where our children live. We keep in touch by video chat for the most part, and send a lot of messages and pictures back and forth.



It is Cherry Blossom Festival time where our daughter lives. We have cherry blossom festivals here in the United States. Among the most famous are the National Cherry Blossom Festival in Washington, DC, the one at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden and others in California and Tennessee. Several of those festivals use the Japanese name, Sakura Matsuri, as a part of their promotion. They also celebrate Japanese culture as part of those events. Our daughter, however, is living in Misawa, in the northern part of Japan, and they have been sending dramatic photos of festivals with century-long traditions. We've enjoyed the natural beauty that surrounds them and we've enjoyed the stories of their travels.



It is Tulip Festival in the part of Washington where our son lives. Many years ago we

were privileged to visit the tulip fields in Holland, but our timing was late for the height of the tulip bloom. We were impressed, however, by the size of the fields dedicated to growing flowers for their beauty. These days, our son lives in an area with a lot of really large tulip fields. The plants are grown both for their value as cut flowers and for the sale of the bulbs to gardeners across the country. Tulip festival occurs at the height of the spring bloom of the plants and there are all kinds of activities and events for people of all ages celebrating the beauty of the flowers and the culture of the region.

Meanwhile, back here in the hills, we had quite a few daffodils up in our yard. They looked pretty good before being buried in snow twice last week. Right now they look as if they might recover, but their heads are still drooping. As far as I know we have no plans for a daffodil festival here in the hills.

If you ask what festival marks our region, you might find a lot of people who have trouble coming up with the names of festivals. I guess you could call the annual Sturgis Motorcycle Rally and Races a festival. Certainly there are a lot of people outdoors celebrating a particular culture. And we have an event, which doesn't seem to be growing much in recent years, known as the Heritage Festival, which occurs in the summer. As for springtime festivals, the visitrapidcity.com website lists the Frühlingsfest & Spring Market set for May 6. There will be a dozen or so booths of local artists and a sampling of craft beer at Main Street Square. There is no mention of flowers in the promotional materials. Then there is the Cinco De Mayo Festival in Deadwood. They've been celebrating this event for a few years now. There is a bit of local flavor in an old mining town turned gambling destination. After all we don't have a lot of Mexican-Americans in our part of the country and Spanish isn't one of the local languages. Still they put up bounce castles and have a petting zoo and there will be a Taco Bar at the Buffalo Bodega. I don't think they have a Mariachi band playing at the local bar. And, of course, they don't go in for flowers much as part of the celebration.

Since we share our yard with deer and turkeys, we've found that there are some real challenges to growing too many flowers. When it comes to bulb plants, we do best with daffodils and iris. Although they will sample the blossoms of both plants, the deer don't seem to be very attracted to either. We learned early in our South Dakota years that tulips and crocus are eaten before we get to see the flowers. When it comes to fruit trees, we don't have any. There are some very lovely crab apple trees in the church yard with showy blossoms. This year the blossoms came off pretty quickly with the spring snow, however. Having a crab apple tree blossom festival might not be a very reliable occasion around here.

It is good to have children who live in other locations so we can vicariously experience their festivals. I've got a while to wait before the garden fills with sunflowers.

May 3, 2017 – The Urge to Climb

I love the outdoors. I love mountains. I grew up in a small town nestled between the Beartooth-Absaroka Wilderness and the Crazy Mountains. I was blessed to live a decade of my adult life in Idaho. Although I have done a bit of rappelling and have learned a few technical mountaineering skills, however, I am not a skilled rock climber. I've never summited a famous mountain, unless you count hiking the Barr Trail up Pikes Peak in Colorado, which is a hiking trail with a long sustained uphill grade made challenging by the altitude. It gains nearly 7500 feet in 13 miles. Since the top of the Pike is 14,115 feet above sea level, it requires a bit of stamina to sustain the low oxygen above 12,000 feet.

So I'm not a mountaineer. I do, however have respect and a bit of admiration for those who climb mountains. I've enjoyed the opportunities that I have had to hang out with serious climbers. I have some sympathy for those who make large investments of time, energy and money to train for the big climbs. I'm not the kind of person who would ask someone the "why?" question. I think I understand the attraction of the high places and the urge to stand on the summit of mountains.

So I suppose if you are attracted to climbing mountains, there is more than a little bit of attraction to the highest mountain on this planet. And May is the month to climb that peak. The 29,029 foot peak is known for formidable winds that can push people off of its surface. The only safe way to climb is to look for times when the winds subside. May is that time. Tshering Sherpa, president of Nepal Mountaineering Association, says, "On average, every climbing season there are about three to four good days with appropriate weather conditions to allow a safe summit climb." That is a narrow time window for those who want to make it to the top.

This month is going to be incredibly busy. The government has issued a record number of permits to foreign climbers this year - 371. Add to that the number of Nepali sherpa mountain guides and there are around 800 people on the mountain. It is a recipe for a traffic jam, especially at the Hillary Step, a vertical rock and ice wall which is climbed on fixed ropes. At 28,900 feet this ascent is deep inside the so-called Death Zone. Imagine having to wait while others are using the ropes. With so many climbers, the delay could be hours long.

I remember, back in 2011, when I saw a photo taken by a German climber of 600 climbers heading toward the summit on a single day. Eleven people died on the mountain that year. And the abandoned gear that was left behind created fears of permanent damage to the mountain. Then in 2014, 16 sherpas were killed by falling ice. And in 2015, eighteen died when an avalanche was triggered by an earthquake.

The mountain can be dangerous. The last thing it needs is too many people.

In addition to the serious, though often inexperienced and undertrained, mountaineers who seek to make it to the summit, there are many more people who make it to Everest Base Camp, a tent city where climbers acclimatize themselves to the altitude for several weeks before heading up to the summit. A wealthy tourist can hire a helicopter to take them up for a day trip and a short trek on the mountain. This time of year, base camp is home to more than 1,500 medics, volunteers and mountaineers. It is bigger than the town where I was born and raised.

Heavy traffic on the mountain increases the risk to climbers. Because of the altitude and exposure, the high places are no place to stand and wait. Frostbite is a serious risk for anyone who stands around for any amount of time. Keeping moving is essential to maximizing the limited amount of oxygen available.

The mountain has already claimed its first victim this year. Experienced climber Ueli Steck fell 3,280 feet during a training run.

I'll never summit the really tall mountains. Age and a lack of training make me a poor candidate for such an adventure. But I have stood on top of some high places. I understand the attraction of the summit. I've climbed Black Elk Peak, South Dakota's highest hill. I've made my way to the top of Bear Butte several times. I get the urge to climb when I am around impressive peaks. But I have also learned a lesson that is important to me. At Uluru, also known as Ayers Rock in the heart of Australia, climbing is not prohibited, but the indigenous people ask those who visit to respect their law and culture by not climbing Uluru:

"That's a really important sacred thing that you are climbing... You shouldn't climb. It's not the real thing about this place. And maybe that makes you a bit sad. But anyway that's what we have to say. We are obliged by Tjukurpa to say. And all the tourists will brighten up and say, 'Oh I see. This is the right way. This is the thing that's right. This is the proper way: no climbing.' "

Kunmanara, traditional owner

When we visited in 2006, we found deep meaning in hiking around the base of the rock.

Near to our home the rock commonly known as Devil's Tower, named Mato Tipi by the Lakota, is similar. Climbers are nearly always present on the rock when the weather is good. This time of year the northeast face of the tower is closed to climbers in an effort to protect the peregrine falcon nesting sites. There is a voluntary closure during the month of June born of respect for the culture of the tribes affiliated with the tower.

Like Uluru, Mate Tipi can be deeply appreciated by walking around the base.

Everest is situated deep in a range of many mountains. It would not be simple to hike around its base. Just figuring out where to walk would be a challenge. It might, however,

make more sense than trying to reach the summit amidst the traffic jam of people who are up there this season.

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May 4, 2017 – Working Toward Justice

By the end of the Civil War, settlement of the American West by non-indigenous people had resulted in significant tension between Native and non-native peoples. The federal government of the United States continued to attempt to control tribal people. The Reservation system, forced upon Native Americans, gave each tribe a specific amount of land. The treaties that established those Reservations continued to be amended and changed and the lands formerly established as Reservations grew smaller and smaller. Tribal life was well-organized but significantly different from Euroamerican lifestyles. As Native Americans became an increasingly smaller minority in their own land, pressures mounted on them to abandon their tribal lifestyle. Assimilation of Native Americans into the dominant culture became a priority for official governmental actions.

On February 8, 1887, President Grover Cleveland signed into law the Dawes Allotment Act. The act was an attempt to force assimilation of Natives into the dominant white culture by breaking up the social units of tribes, granting land title to individuals, and encouraging farming on individual plots of land. The act was also an explicit attempt to decrease the cost of administration of the rights promised to Native Peoples in the establishment of the Reservation system. Senator Henry Teller of Colorado opposed the act saying it was a blatant attempt to take Indian lands and open them up to settlement. Although the act purported to be for the benefit of Native people, in reality it was a huge land grab.

The effects of the act were nearly immediate and devastating. Land owned by Indians decreased from 138 million acres in 1887 to 48 million acres in 1934. The largest change occurred between 1887 and 1900 and the state where the most number of acres were transferred away from native control under the act was South Dakota.

You can't tell the history of our state without telling the story of the Dawes act, and its subsequent amendments. The Burke Act of 1906, empowered the Secretary of Interior to force Indians to accept title for land. It also granted citizenship to those who received land. The allotted land was taken out of Trust and subject to taxation, a provision that was rarely explained and frequently resulted in the loss of land title by the Natives who had been forced to accept the allotment.

It is a long and complex history - one that requires more detail than can be explored in this blog. I bring it up not to fully explore the dynamics of Native lands, but rather to acknowledge the role of the Dawes act in the history of our church here in South Dakota. The creating of individual title to lands within the Reservation and the specter of

lands which previously had not been taxed being subject to property tax put the church in an interesting position. By donating a portion of their land to the church for religious purposes, individuals who had received allotments could decrease their property tax burden. Our particular denomination was especially active in establishing churches on the Cheyenne River Reservation and had interest in establishing churches in other Native areas of South Dakota as well. As congregations were formed, land was obtained by donation and church buildings were constructed, often financed by the American Missionary Association, which held title to the property as security against the church building loan. These titles were later transferred to the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries. When Homeland Ministries decided that title should be returned to local congregations, many of the churches were not fully organized and so the titles were transferred to the South Dakota Conference of the United Church of Christ. This was the status of the ownership of church properties when I moved to South Dakota in 1995. Over the years since that time, the Dakota Association of the United Church of Christ has strengthened its organization and become a 501c3 corporation. It simply made sense to transfer the titles to the churches to the Dakota Association, returning control and ownership of property back to Native leaders and allowing for communal ownership of property as has always been the indigenous way.

The story wasn't quite as simple as outlined, however. There were a lot of meetings, discussions and research required to effect the transfers. In the various transfers of title after allotment, lands were exchanged by quit claim deed. However, such a transfer from the Conference to the Dakota Association was not acceptable in all circumstances because of subsequent actions such as utility easements, grazing allowances and other uses of the property. Not all of the counties where the lands are located have full time Assessors meaning that considerable planning and travel was required to determine the status of individual parcels of land.

Nonetheless leaders of the Dakota Association and the South Dakota Conference persisted and the titles were transferred in small groups to the Association, where they are now held. After nearly a century of land titles being held by non-Native organizations, control of church lands has been returned to an Indigenous organization.

The action of the South Dakota Conference doesn't reverse the negative effects of the Dawes Act. Tribes have been decimated by the effects of poverty. Inheritance laws have resulted in the fractionalization of many of the original allotments, making land ownership so complex that there are many acres that provide no benefit whatsoever to the legal owners. The presence of so many acres of deeded land within the boundaries of the Reservations make management of Trust land so complex that the tribes are continually embroiled in land management conflicts and issues.

Still, it is good to have come this far in terms of the church's understanding of our role in the events that have led to our current situation. Despite the fact that it felt good to attend the ceremonies where titles were returned to the Dakota Association, much work

remains. Our stories have become intertwined in such a way that continuing conversations and increasing understanding are essential as we try to move together as common members of the church.

There is much that remains unfinished.

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May 5, 2017 – Magazines

I grew up in a home with a lot of magazines. My parents subscribed to and read quite a few. The postwar period was a period of glory days for print media. Television was beginning to gain steam, but a lot of people turned to magazines. The two big photo magazines, Look and Life were sometimes in direct competition with each other. We received both at times during my growing up years, but Life was the one I remember the most. There were some really memorable photo essays published in that journal. It seemed as if most households in our town received Reader's Digest. I started reading the magazine for the joke pages, of which there were several in each issue.

We didn't receive the two big news magazines, Newsweek and Time at our house, though we knew that they were available at the library and we often turned to them for school projects.

And of course we received National Geographic. And we kept every issue. I mean EVERY issue. We had built-in bookcases in our family room with sliding glass doors in front of the shelves that held years and years of National Geographic. It was a major event for me as an adult, three years ago, to end my subscription to the National Geographic magazine. I still have every issue from the beginning of publication of the magazine through 2014. The early issues I have in a digital format, but I have 1978 - 2014 all collected in deluxe slipcases. I have no idea what I am going to do with them. The places that might want them already have them.

My family also received magazines that had to do with my father's work. The Aircraft Owners and Pilot's Association (AOPA) journal was always around our house as was the National Hardware Dealers Association magazine.

Then there were some more obscure magazines. We got a few that none of my friends' parents received and some that weren't even in the library. The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists and the Journal of the American Civil Liberties Union weren't widely read in our town, but they were read in our home. We also had church magazines including The Christian Century.

When I was in college and began to spend more time with the woman who became my wife and her family, I discovered a few new-to-me magazines in her home. The Atlantic

Monthly had some great fiction writing in it. I hadn't read a lot of fiction up to that point in my education but I began to develop a taste for short stories. Her family also received the New Yorker. Both of those magazines seemed to me to display an air of sophistication and education that marked their household.

In a way that was reminiscent of my initial reading of the Reader's Digest, I began to look at the cartoons in the New Yorker. By the time I discovered the New Yorker, it had nearly 60 years of experience with cartoons, and it offered what I judged to be a sophisticated humor. Unlike the multi-panel comics preferred by newspapers, the New Yorker leaned toward single panel comics. There were some pretty talented artists drawing for the New Yorker in those days. Humor is a matter of perspective and relevance, and the New Yorker's cartoons in those days had a particular edge. I was probably less aware of the reasons for that edge in those days, but part of it was the influence of the women's movement and the emergence of female cartoonists. The thing about a print cartoon is that it lingers. You can examine its subtleties and look again for its nuances.

The cartoons of the New Yorker invited me into its other content. I enjoyed the short fiction and even found myself reading bits and pieces of its "Goings On About Town" section - the list of theatre, dance, music and night life events in New York. As I grew into my adulthood and advanced in my educational career the New Yorker seemed to me to be a mark of someone who was emerging from the small town where I grew up.

My educational experience also introduced me to professional journals. The quarterly Register of Chicago Theological Seminary was often mentioned by our professors and was the first periodical to publish an article that I had written. Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology, Word & World, Currents in Biblical Research, Praxis and other journals offered current theological research and academic studies.

As I became settled in my career, the magazines in our home began to reflect some of my hobbies. I subscribed to Sport Aviation for decades and kept the magazines in the hope of someday building an airplane, though that seems unlikely these days.

The mailman still delivers magazines to our home. Wooden Boat, Messing About in Boats and Wooden Canoe arrive monthly. Canoeroots and Adventure Kayak are generally read in their entirety, even though they have more photographs than actual content. It seems as if the articles are getting shorter and shorter with each issue.

I know that the world is changing and that the days of magazines that are printed on paper are fading. It won't happen suddenly, but more and more journals are becoming easily available online. I no longer feel the need to subscribe to the National Geographic in part because I can access every issue of the magazine through my computer. I'm learning to read a few of my favorite magazines online. I can imagine switching to fully digital for Wooden Boat, a magazine that I like to read and more and more read on the

computer simply because it comes out online sooner than the print edition arrives at our home.

It is hard, however, to imagine curling up on the edge of the sofa or in bed with my computer. The device is much more sensitive to being dropped or mishandled than an inexpensive magazine. Time will tell how quickly the printing industry fades. I think there will be a few good magazines around for the rest of my life.

Sometimes I wonder, however, if my grandchildren will ever experience what I did - getting to know someone by surveying the magazines on the coffee table in their living room. After all, my grandchildren don't need a coffee table in their living room. They don't have magazines arriving every month in the mail.

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May 6, 2017 – Together There is Hope

We've walked on chilly mornings and warm ones, in fog and on sunny days, in rain and in bright sunshine. We've walked in twos and threes and we've walked in larger groups. We've walked with children in strollers and with grandmothers and grandfathers. Today we will walk again. The birds are singing and the forecast is for a bright, sunny day with near-record temperatures.

This will be the 15th annual Front Porch Coalition 5k walk and fun run. Our theme this year, as has been the case for the other 14, will be "Together there is Hope." Participants will receive a t-shirt with the Front Porch Coalition logo on the front and the words "Together there is Hope" along with a list of the walk's sponsors on the back. I'll add my t-shirt to the collection of shirts from the other walks. I've got them all. It is heartening to see that the ones from recent years have a lot more sponsors than was the case in the first few years of the walk.

The walk is a growing phenomenon. Those first years, there weren't all that many walkers. This year there will be so many that we have had to allow an hour for registration of the walkers. I guess that might be judged to be success. More walkers, more sponsors, a bigger event. The reason there are more walkers, however, is that there are more survivors. We who walk do so because our lives have been touched by suicide. Someone we knew and loved has died by suicide. And the number of people whose lives are touched by suicide keeps growing and growing.

2017 started out at a record pace here in Rapid City. There was a cluster of suicides during the first two months of the year that saw our Local Outreach to Survivors of Suicide (LOSS) Team responding weekly and, a couple of times twice in the same week. We know the trend. Although there are ups and downs in individual years, the trend has been one of more and more suicides.

Every death causes pain and grief for those who are left behind. Death by suicide carries the additional burdens of sudden and traumatic death, social stigma, and the knowledge that many deaths by suicide are preventable when appropriate response is provided. There is a tested and proven routine of Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) that works when trained responders reach a person before suicide occurs. Each year sees breakthroughs in the treatment of Depression, a major factor in many deaths by suicide.

It is the social stigma, however, which we struggle to overcome. That is one of the reasons we walk. Suicide is the result of mental illness. It is a real brain disorder over which the victim does not have control. It can be a chronic life-long illness that requires constant treatment and, in many cases, hospitalizations. But our society does not treat mental illness the same way it treats other illnesses. Treatment is less likely to be covered by insurance and can be so costly that victims cannot afford it if they have to self pay. There is less support from private donors for the foundations leading research into mental illness. And, as the United States House of Representatives demonstrated this week, there is little understanding of or sympathy for the victims of mental illness in the high places of government.

It is no wonder that the victims of mental illness end up thinking that they are left alone.

That's one of the reasons we walk. We sincerely believe that no one should have to walk the journey of mental illness alone. No one should have to walk the journey of grief and loss alone. We walk together so no one walks alone.

The walk is, unashamedly, a fund raising event. The Front Porch Coalition operates on a very tight budget to provide suicide awareness and prevention training in our community. It also operates the LOSS Team, a trained group of volunteers who respond to every suicide in our community. Keeping a team of volunteers coordinated so that there are always teams of two or three volunteers ready to respond 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, is a challenging endeavor. This year we need to raise additional funds because our City Council eliminated the Front Porch Coalition from its budget. It was, of course a short-sighted action. Each suicide that is not prevented costs the city more money in law enforcement and investigation costs than a year of support for the Front Porch Coalition.

We will, however, continue our work with or without the support of the City Council. Rapid City's loss team is more fully integrated with and supported by law enforcement than is the case in almost every other city in our nation. The Sheriff, Chief of Police, Coroners and Patrol Officers know how helpful our LOSS team is and how important it is to the well-being of our community.

There remains a lot of education. People don't understand suicide. Those who have not experienced mental illness striking a friend or family member don't fully realize its impact. The general public needs to learn a lot more about prevention and treatment. We can save hundreds of lives each year by making sure that first responders are all trained in ASIST skills. Every responder knows what to do in the event of a heart attack. They have been trained in CPR. Now we need to train them with the skills required to prevent suicide. It is about saving lives.

So we walk. Rain or shine, hot or cold, we walk. I've got a huge "to-do" list this week and I'm a bit intimidated by my schedule. But I have time to walk. I will make time to walk. It is high up on my priority list. And we will keep walking. 15 years comes to only about 45 miles of walking for suicide prevention and support of those who grieve.

I've got quite a few more miles left in me.

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May 7, 2017 – Trees

We didn't do anything special to celebrate Arbor Day this year. It has been more than a week since the day and, to be honest, I didn't even think of it or remember the date, other than a general sense that Arbor Day lands in the spring. The official day is the last Friday of April. Arbor Day began in Nebraska, not far from our home here in South Dakota and you'd think that we might take notice, but it hasn't seemed to top the list of popular holidays.

It does, however, seem to me that a day to celebrate and plant trees is a day worthy of our recognition.

For most of my life, I guess, I have taken trees for granted. Much of my growing up was done down by the river where willows and cottonwood trees grow. These are fast-growing trees with relatively short lives. There are still plenty of cottonwoods down at the river, but most of them are different trees than were there when I was a kid. The old grandfather and grandmother trees have come down in windstorms and new ones have taken their place. Down by the river it is easy to get new trees. Just stop mowing in the area where you want a tree. By the end of the first summer there will be stems a foot or more tall. By the end of the second summer you can thin the trees and decide which ones to keep. Cottonwood trees grow up from the roots of nearby trees. In a place where there is no human activity the strongest shoots survive and others fade away as the trees grow. This results in many clusters where two or three or four trees are growing close together and sometimes angle away from each other in search of sunlight.

Our mother always wanted evergreen trees on the place. I don't know how many times we'd take buckets up into the pine forest in the mountains and bring back seedlings that we transplanted into the yard. Most of those trees we planted didn't survive. Over the years, however, a few strong and sturdy trees made it and now, when I visit the place there are a half dozen trees 20 or more feet tall.

Trees are incredible living things. A tree is both complex and beautiful. Artists find out how complex they are with each attempt to draw a tree. Making a three-dimensional model of one is an even more difficult task. And as to their beauty, one only has to lie on the ground and look at a clear blue sky through the branches of a tree, or take a drive down a winding country road in the autumn when the leaves have turned color, or stroll through a grove of Redwood, Hemlock, Douglas Fir or Cedar trees.

I grew up with the legend of Johnny Appleseed. The stories we heard and told were probably quite a bit distant from the reality. When the nurseryman John Chapman set out across the west planting acres and acres of apple trees, the west was anything beyond Pennsylvania and he didn't make it across the Mississippi River. And the apples he planted didn't produce the sweet eating fruit that have become such a common part of my diet. The apples that Chapman planted were used to make America's beverage-of-choice at the time, hard apple cider. At the time, the Ohio Company of Associates was buying up huge swaths of land and parceling it out to settlers. One of the requirements of the settlers was to form a permanent household and plant 50 apple trees and 20 peach trees in three years. It took 10 years for the apple trees to bear fruit, so it was a long-term investment. Chapman, a savvy businessman, wandered out ahead of the settlers, planting trees into orchards which he in turn sold to the settlers as their arrived.

During Prohibition, many of the trees that Chapman planted were cut down by federal agents seeking to curb the trade in alcoholic beverages. In some cases those trees were replaced with fruit that was suitable for eating and apple growers began to promote varieties that were good tasting and healthful. The phrase, "An apple a day keeps the doctor away," comes from the attempt to re-brand apples as healthy food rather than the source for an alcoholic beverage.

These days, however, alcoholic ciders are on the rise in popularity. I have a niece, trained as a sommelier, who now specializes in hard ciders. Yes, you can make your living with that kind of expertise.

We, however, don't have any apple trees in our yard. We live in a pine forest, with sections of birch and spruce in places where there is a bit more water. You can find naturally growing oak trees in the hills as well. Still, almost every spring I toy with the idea of planting a few apple trees in our yard. I'm not much at providing care for trees and I know that healthy fruit trees require a bit more water than they'll get naturally around here. We've struggled with the few pine and spruce trees that we've planted,

and have probably lost more than have survived over the years. Still, it is a good plan to plant trees and nurture them as best as we are able. Trees are, after all, a legacy that one can leave to those who come after us. Many varieties of trees live longer than the span of a single human life.

The poet W.S. Merwin, U.S. Poet Laureate in 2010, speaks eloquently of trees:

Elegy for a Walnut Tree

by W.S. Merwin

Old friend now there is no one alive
who remembers when you were young
it was high summer when I first saw you
in the blaze of day most of my life ago
with the dry grass whispering in your shade
and already you had lived through wars
and echoes of wars around your silence
through days of parting and seasons of absence
with the house emptying as the years went their way
until it was home to bats and swallows
and still when spring climbed toward summer
you opened once more the curled sleeping fingers
of newborn leaves as though nothing had happened
you and the seasons spoke the same language
and all these years I have looked through your limbs
to the river below and the roofs and the night
and you were the way I saw the world

I missed Arbor Day this year. Perhaps I can make up for it by appreciating the trees that surround me today.

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May 8, 2017 – Getting to Gratitude

I try to make time each day for quiet. On Sundays I am most disciplined, making room for a half hour of sitting quietly and intentionally focusing my meditation. I practice my breathing and clear my mind. Spiritual disciplines require practice and making time for quiet on a regular basis adds depth to the experience. I prefer to use the term “quiet” because I have never experienced total silence. I’m always surprised at how much sound there is when I take time to be quiet. Some light fixtures hum. A refrigerator can be remarkably loud when it is an isolated sound. A building will emit creaks and groans as it heats up and cools down. And our community is always in motion with distant train whistles, siren sounds, traffic noise and other sounds of people coming and going.

Our home is remarkably quiet much of the time. I love to sleep with the windows open. The air seems a bit sweeter when there is some movement and the sounds of our neighborhood are so familiar to me that they don't interrupt my sleep. Last night, however, we forgot to place a wedge under our bedroom door, which we leave open to allow the air to circulate throughout the house, and when a thunderstorm blew through the area the change in pressure caused the bedroom door to close with a slam. That woke me up. Realizing that there was no danger and no cause for alarm, I lay on my bed listening to the sound of the storm passing by. The center of the storm must have been a ways away because I only heard the echo of thunder as it rolled through the hills. Most of the noise was wind noise as the wind picked up and rocked the trees. The pine trees are good at absorbing wind and noise, but the sound of the wind in the trees is familiar and reassuring. The rain falls silently on the grass and trees, but I can hear it splashing on the concrete driveway and the paved street and before long enough rain had fallen on the roof to add the sound of the water rushing down the rainspout at the corner of the house next to our bedroom.

The storm moved on and the sounds went away slowly. I dozed. When I woke this morning it was very quiet indeed outside of my home. We have fairly quiet neighbors. One has a very powerful sound system linked to his television with a deep bass that can be heard throughout the neighborhood, but he had been working a normal schedule these days and wasn't watching movies in the middle of the night. I almost never hear the deer, except for an occasional snort in the fall. The turkeys can be noisy, but they are quiet at night. And with the clouds from the storm moving off to the east the sunrise was muted and the song birds are slow to begin their chorus this morning. I like the songbird chorus because it is in sync with my sleeping and as the number of chirping birds increases and the sound gets louder I know it is time for me to rise and get on with my day.

Some mornings I linger for a few moments just to listen to the birdsong. I know it is a seasonal treat that flies south for the winter, so hearing the birds promises warmth for our days.

Those who are practiced in meditation and the art of focusing one's mind suggest that seekers clear their minds by allowing free thought, embracing each idea as it comes along and then dismissing it so that extraneous thought can be released and the mind is allowed to focus on what is most important. I am less disciplined with my quiet times. I doubt if I have ever achieved a total release from the thoughts and ideas that keep floating through my brain. What I do experience is a heightened ability to think things one at a time in place of the somewhat confused jumble of thoughts and ideas that occupy my brain in busier parts of the day. The flash of insight that solves a problem, however, rarely comes to me in the moments of focused meditation. It is more likely that such an idea will come to me as I am going through my daily routines. I once saw a cartoon of a man sitting at a desk that has been set up with a shower head pouring

water on the man as he sat and worked. Fresh ideas coming to one in the shower is almost cliché, but I have experienced the phenomenon. I also have had some good ideas while driving to work and walking through the grocery store.

I seem to become more open to creative thinking when I am allowing my thoughts to flow as opposed to trying to control them. I don't have much luck with controlling my ideas in the first place. It isn't uncommon for me to simply allow my mind to wander and to follow the stream of consciousness wherever it leads me as is witnessed by the rambling nature of this morning's blog. I suspect that this style of writing is common in my blogs and familiar to those who read several of them.

This morning as I lay in bed listening to the sounds of the outside world I felt a familiar sense of gratitude come over me. I am so fortunate to be able to live in this place, surrounded by beauty, safe and secure in my home, free from fear of crime or threatening weather or any other dangers that surround so many of the people of this world. Even in the dark when I can see almost nothing, I am surround by beautiful sound. The symphony of waking birds rivals the greatest of orchestras.

Perhaps that sense of gratitude is the appropriate destination of my mind. When I allow myself enough quiet to get to gratitude, I know my discipline is not in vain.

May you discover gratitude in your life today as well.

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May 9, 2017 – Too Connected?

Like many others, I watched from the sidelines as France elected Emmanuel Macron president over the weekend. I'm no expert in French politics, or in the politics of our own country for that matter, but I am interested in how we are connected with one another across national boundaries. I am aware that what happens in other countries has an effect on what happens in our own home. Although official results won't be confirmed by the Constitutional Council until tomorrow, it is clear that Macron has defeated Marianne Le Pen by a substantial margin. Le Pen has conceded defeat and Macron will take office next Sunday.

There is another bit of French culture that I've been watching. On the first of January this year, the French government introduced legislation which gives workers in the country "the right to disconnect." All companies with more than 50 employees – which accounts for about half of the French workforce – must now negotiate with their employees over their "right to disconnect from the use of digital tools" to ensure workers can get enough personal and family time. It remains unclear what this will mean for individual employees, but it is clear that the country is trying to refocus the line between work and home life.

I am aware of a need for reset in my life. I understand that I do not work in an organization with more than 50 employees and even if I were in France the new law wouldn't have authority over me. My situation is pretty much the result of my own decisions. However, I have chosen to be on call this week, which means that I need to have my phone with me at all times. It was necessary yesterday as I needed to respond to a suicide that had occurred in our town. The first call came as I waited for the tire shop to complete a bit of work on my vehicle. It was, after all my "day off," a day devoted to personal errands and chores. I used my phone to assemble a response team and soon we were on site providing assistance and support to grieving family members. One never knows for sure when the call will come.

With my phone in a pouch on my belt, I continued with the activities of my day. As I was planting my garden, I received four phone calls, all of which were not particularly time sensitive. Routine work drifts into my personal time in ways that did not occur before the advent of cell phones. Although my cell phone gives me the capability to check email when I am away from the office, I try to keep checking emails to designated times. Most of my colleagues know that I don't read emails in the evening or on my day off. I do, however, occasionally run into problems with that practice. I've been reprimanded on several occasions for not responding to emails in what the sender considers to be a reasonable amount of time, which is usually less than a few hours.

One of the proponents of the new French law is Fabien Mathy, a psychologist at the Sophia Antipolis University in Nice. He calculated that he spent at least 600 hours reading, writing and sorting email messages while at work. That is the equivalent of a quarter of his work time just dealing with email. Mathy warns that emails make us less productive, not more, and have all of the characteristics of addition. Many employees find it too easy to put off doing real work under the pressure of the need to stay constantly in contact through email. "Emails are not actually good for our work most of the time," Mathy says. "They disrupt real, interesting work."

As a result, officials in France have concluded that constantly connected lifestyles pose a public health risk. That conclusion is supported by numerous studies that longer and longer working hours lead to work-related physical, emotions and mental exhaustion. Exhausted, burned out workers can create billions of dollars of healthcare costs. In Britain, researchers estimate that 11.7 million days were lost to work-related stress, anxiety or depression in 2015/16.

I used to live my life as if the best way to solve a problem was to work harder and longer. I now realize that sometimes taking a break from work can actually make me more productive.

It is interesting to me that France, in contrast to the United States, has determined that this is a societal problem that needs to be addressed with shared solutions. Although

the new French law doesn't mandate that businesses shut down their servers, or even require employees to disconnect, it does reflect the belief that there needs to be an appropriate distinction between work and home.

After at least 19 suicides by employees between 2008 and 2009, French-owned global telecommunications company Orange (formerly France Telecom) chose to change the role of technology in its employees' lives. They discourage employees from sending work messages outside of office hours and trained managers to realize how sending out-of-hours emails can create undue stress for employees who feel a need to respond immediately.

The problem, of course, isn't the technology. It is as old as humanity itself. It is no mistake that taking time off from work and allowing time for sabbath is one of the ten commandments. We humans struggle with the balance of work and personal life and we don't always get that balance right.

I doubt that the French law is the right solution for every country. I'm not proposing that such a law be imitated in the United States. But I think it is good for us to pay attention and to see how this new law works. Rising health care costs is a major issue here in our country. We, too are interested in exploring the limits of employee productivity. We too have significant problems with work-related stress and a high suicide rate.

Even without the law we could choose to put down our devices and disconnect. It isn't a bad idea.

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May 10, 2017 – Interruptions

Years ago I read a quote from Henri Nouwen that has since become quite famous. He wrote, "I used to complain about all the interruptions to my work until I realized that these interruptions were my work." I'm confident that the idea didn't originate with Nouwen. Many of the world's truly great ideas have circulated through many minds and have origins deep within our culture. Nowen's skillful writing, however, enabled the thought to be communicated to a much wider audience and the quote is most often attributed to him.

About ten years into my ministry, the books of Henri Nouwen had a significant influence on me. It seemed that he really understood the practice of ministry and how it shapes one's perception of the entire world. Although much of his professional career was invested as a teacher and writer, he chose, after several significant periods of retreat and discernment, to leave his successful career as a university professor that included positions at the University of Notre Dame, Yale Divinity School and Harvard Divinity School to work with mentally and physically disabled people at L'Arche Daybreak

community in Richmond Hill, Ontario. It always seemed to me, however, that he was at heart a pastor and that his books, even those written during his career as a professor, provided much support and understanding to pastors. His early books, "With Open Hands," "Out of Solitude," and "The Wounded Healer" are still very relevant for pastors. His letter to his father on the anniversary of his mother's death, published as "In Memoriam," is a classic and deeply helpful book on the process of grief.

So I have tried to think of my work in terms described Nouwen many times. This week has been a good time to bring back up his quote about interruptions. On Monday I was at the tire shop when I took a phone call about a family in need of support at the time of the suicide of a family member. Yesterday I was helping cook for a barbecue for the employees of the Sheriff's Office when my phone rang and delivered the news of the need to do a bit of diffusing with first responders who were caring for victims of an assault. Later, last evening, I was home after a long day's work and trying to do a couple of household chores when there was a call from someone who was completely out of food, hungry and didn't have the means to get out. I took a few groceries to that person.

Later that evening, I received this text message: "Today is our anniversary. It was the best anniversary dinner we had in 37 years. Thank you." It is hard to think that about \$25 worth of groceries would add up to the best anniversary dinner, but I think it is probably a small fraction of what we spent when we celebrated our 37th anniversary.

I often think of my work as the routine running of an institution. I measure my success by the success of the congregation. Is the budget balanced? Are the employees properly cared for? Will the building be well-maintained when the next pastor comes to take over? I worship attendance what it should be? The most common question asked of me about my work is this: "Is your congregation growing?" The questioner rarely says how growth is to be measured, but the most common assumption is that it is the number of members or the average attendance in worship. And the answer is, "No it isn't growing, but it isn't shrinking, either. It is a remarkably stable congregation."

But I wasn't called into the ministry to be the maintainer of a religious institution. I was called to minister to the needs of the community. That involves serving the church and its members, to be sure, but it is not now and never has been a ministry that is supposed to be defined by the walls of the church. I have always felt called to serve the wider community. I have consistently served the wider community as a volunteer just as I expect the other members of the congregation to give freely of their time and resources.

Of course I am still responsible for making sure that the building gets unlocked in the morning and locked in the evening, that the plumbing is working and the restrooms are clean, that the office phone is answered and the publications go out each week and each month, that the outside groups are welcomed and the sanctuary is comfortable. I

still have to make sure that the bills are paid and the payroll is met. But my real work lies elsewhere.

The Gospel of John reports that Jesus asked Simon Peter if he loved him. Peter responded eagerly, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” The Jesus says, “Feed my lambs.” The question is repeated again and again. Three times Peter is asked, until he is hurt by the repeated questioning. The story goes on to say that after this conversation Jesus said to Peter, “Follow me.” It is a story that was mentioned at the service where I was ordained as a minister. I was literally charged, at my ordination, to feed Jesus’ sheep.

They wouldn’t like being called sheep, but yesterday at noon I was cooking burgers for the first responders who serve our county. I shook hands with deputies and city police officers and shared smiles as they ate together. Then, in the evening, after I had eaten my supper, I took a couple of bags of groceries to a tiny one-room cabin where the only other food I saw was part of a package of hamburger buns. I didn’t know until later that it was a wedding anniversary night for a couple who had endured so much pain and loss over the years.

It is likely that feeding sheep is a much better way of showing my love for Jesus than supervising the plumbers working at the church. Nouwen got it right. My work is the interruptions.

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May 11, 2017 – Leary of the Internet

I am connected to the Internet every day. I begin each day by writing and posting my blog. I carry a smartphone that is connected to the Internet with me virtually all of the time. Our church has wireless throughout the building and our main database program resides in the cloud on servers in another city. Our church system backs up to distant computers during the night as we sleep. I use debt and credit cards.

There is a sense of confidence and a sense of vulnerability when I think of the Internet. I’m not a big fan of social media. I have a Facebook page and I check posts made by others. The church has a Facebook page and we use it to communicate with families in the church and there is a space for members of the church to post their ideas and pictures and engage in conversation. There is also a church Twitter feed, though as Twitter goes, we are very quiet, usually only posting links to other church documents such as the annual reports and monthly newsletters.

I am aware of the positive ways our son uses social media in his work. I receive his Twitter feed and his Instagram posts, so I know what he is doing. I look at our daughter’s Facebook posts on a nearly daily basis.

Still, I'm uneasy with social media. I'm reluctant to post or to even "like" a Facebook post. Recently I tried to participate in an online analysis of my social media use and the automated program returned an "insufficient data" error message. I don't use social media enough for that particular program to make any rating of my social media use at all. I was actually relieved with the result.

I have been very reluctant to post pictures of my family online and when I do, I try to select photos that make it hard to identify their features. It could well be that my caution is unwarranted and that my fears are unfounded. Still my way of doing things is working for me for the present.

Having said all of that, I am touched by social media interchanges. Yesterday our daughter posted a picture of herself with her mother that was taken on her wedding day. There were several loving comments made about the picture including a touching exchange between my wife and my daughter. It really brightened my day to see the smiling faces of two of the most important women in my life. I love both of them more than I can say. I love the picture. It probably would be the way of the Internet to copy and repost that picture along with this blog, but I won't be doing so. I know that my daughter's Facebook page gets a lot more viewers than my daily journal. In some ways this page is more discreet and isolated than the wider milieu of Facebook. However, it seems to be my nature to be guarded about what I post or repost on the Internet.

Much of the reposting that is done on the internet is done by bots, also known as web robots. A bot is a bit of software that runs an automated program. Typically bots do the same task over and over again at speeds that are well beyond that of a human. And bots don't need to take breaks for meals or sleep. The tasks performed by bots generally have to do with distributing junk news or attacking certain web sites to overwhelm them with traffic. More than half of all Internet traffic is done by bots. Bots generally leave some sort of signature that makes it look like they are actual humans. They have algorithms that generate false names by the thousands.

It may well be that the greatest threat posed by the internet to me has nothing to do with how much information or which images I include in my modest Internet activities. Rather it has to do with my vulnerability to junk news posted by bots that have been set up by those who want to manipulate public opinion. I try to get my news from established and reliable sources. I shy away from places that are made up of a lot of copied and pasted stories. I am suspicious of online articles that are connected to sources that I've never previously encountered. Still, there is a great power in a message that is repeated over and over again. There is plenty of research that indicates that people become more and more likely to believe a falsehood when it is repeated multiple times.

We are just beginning to sense the threats to democracy posed by this relatively new way of disseminating information. In retrospect, it is clear that the recent Brexit vote in

Great Britain was influenced by a totally false claim that the move would save Britain 24 billion pounds and that much of that money could be invested in the National Health Service. The exact impact of junk news on the 2016 US presidential election is perhaps not as clear cut, but social media bot attacks originating both within and from outside of the United States probably influenced many voters who were unaware of the truth or lack of truth in the claims they read. Polls show that an alarming number of American voters believe statements that are demonstrably false. The use of social media to influence the recent elections in South Korea and France has also been widely covered by reliable news sources.

So my caution when it comes to the Internet is not without a logical basis. Since I don't want to avoid the use of the Internet, I need to learn how to use it responsibly. If that means my web presence is rather small and my social media footprint provides insufficient data for analysis that is OK with me. My children and grandchildren will have to deal with the Internet in ways that I can't begin to imagine. I think I'll bypass the Internet and go directly to God with my prayers for their safety and for the safety of all of God's children.

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May 12, 2017 – Forgiveness

I use my smartphone as an alarm clock. I like the fact that it allows me to set multiple alarms, that it doesn't take up much space on my headboard, and that it allows me to choose the alarm tones. I like a very soft tone. I wake easily and there is no reason for my wife to be awakened when my alarm goes off. I also have my phone set to collect various alert signals that it receives overnight and to display them in the morning. I don't want to be awakened by each downloading podcast or each news alert from BBC during the night. This morning the first alert message on the list was "Forgiveness is now available from the TED Radio Hour." It was a reference to a podcast that is now available. I listen to the TED Radio Hour on an irregular basis, sometimes skipping episodes, sometimes listening to two or three in a row, depending on what else is going on in my life. The message, however, struck my fancy as I rose from bed.

Who would have thought that a radio program would be the source of forgiveness?

Perhaps the reason I responded to the alert with a chuckle has to do with a conversation that I had yesterday. I was visiting with an inmate in the County Jail. The inmate is facing serious charges and is being held in isolation 23 hours a day, being allowed out of his cell into a commons area only one hour per day. I know very little of his story, but I have been visiting him for several weeks, so have witnessed a fairly dramatic turnaround in what he says to me. He has been thinking about forgiveness a lot. At first the only book he had was the Bible, so he began to read it out of boredom. Now he has been provided with an MP3 player that is loaded with Christian music and

several hours of sermons from a variety of preachers. I've never listened to any of the programming on the MP3 player, but considering the congregation that provides the units to the jail, I suspect that it leans towards what some might label fundamentalist theology.

This is a man who has done some things in his life for which he is sorry. He has reasons to seek forgiveness.

When I read the alert on my phone this morning, I immediately thought of him and his MP3 player. If one can obtain forgiveness from the TED Radio Hour, perhaps his obtaining forgiveness from a media preacher over an MP3 player isn't out of the question.

My conversations with him so far, however, lead me to believe that he has a way to go in understanding forgiveness. Yesterday he was talking to me about what he thinks he has to do to earn forgiveness. I tried to explain that forgiveness wasn't something that can be earned. It is freely offered by God and not the result of specific actions or the right set of intellectual assents. God forgives. We receive forgiveness as an unearned gift. The concept may be beginning to make sense to him. At least he voices agreement when we study the scriptures and I speak with him.

He may be a very worldly and hardened adult, but when it comes to faith, he is just beginning to grow. My conversations with him aren't all that different from those I have with teenagers preparing for confirmation. There are a lot of things of which he has not previously thought.

Even mature Christians who have been living their faith for many years will sometimes slip into kind of intellectual laziness when it comes to forgiveness. We think that it flows from a formula. First you recognize your mistake. Then you ask for forgiveness. Then you resolve not to repeat your mistake. 1, 2, 3, success!

It really doesn't work quite like that.

The Scriptures, especially those of the Christian New Testament, speak of the challenge for us to forgive others. "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." (Colossians 3:13) Forgiveness is not something that is accomplished once and for all in a single event, but rather an on-going process that has to be repeated: "Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them." (Luke 17:4) There is a biblical understanding that the forgiveness we can offer to one another as humans is an incomplete process and one that requires constant vigilance. When Peter asked how often he should forgive, he said, "As many as seven times?" Jesus answered, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven." (Matthew 18:22)

Turning to ourselves and our own resources, forgiveness is something that we have to do over and over again.

God, however, offers a deeper forgiveness. In Isaiah, the prophet reminds the people, “I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.” (Isaiah 43:25)

God forgives.

We are called to forgive as well. And our forgiveness must be practiced over and over again.

At least with our rhetoric, it seems that we understand the first part of the teachings about forgiveness. We turn to God for forgiveness when we have sinned. We seem to be slower to accept the simple fact that our response to the gift of God’s forgiveness is expressed in our forgiving others and then repeating that process many, many times.

It is probably a good discipline for me to visit inmates in the jail and to try to bring them a bit of teaching and faith that is appropriate to their circumstances. I probably learn more and receive more from the conversations than do the inmates.

I should probably continue to study and learn more about the nature of forgiveness as well. Maybe I should even listen to that podcast. After all, “Forgiveness is available from the TED radio hour.”

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May 13, 2017 – A Bit More on Forgiveness

After writing about forgiveness just yesterday, I am aware that I don’t really understand all of the dynamics of forgiveness. I struggle with the simple task of forgiving myself sometimes. From time to time I do something that, in retrospect, is pretty stupid. I know better, but find myself acting too hastily or doing something without thinking it out.

Late yesterday afternoon I was loading a canoe onto my truck in preparation for our upcoming vacation. I load canoes all the time. After all, I have five canoes. The particular canoe I was loading yesterday is my lightest and smallest canoe. I built it back in 1998. It was the second canoe I built. I know the boat and I have loaded it onto racks hundreds of times. This particular rack is a bit tricky because I had already loaded a rowboat onto the truck so the top rack was full. I was loading the canoe onto a set of J bars on the side of the rack. I climbed up a short ladder so I could reach over the canoe to secure a takedown strap. Somehow I leaned a bit too far and lost my balance. In order to avoid falling, I jumped off of the ladder and landed safely. The canoe, however,

took a rough trip. It fell from the rack and hit hard on the concrete. Upon examination I discovered that the joint where the thwart meets the gunwale was compromised by the pressure of the fall. It isn't a big repair. It will take a couple of hours and with a drill and a bit of dowel and some epoxy the canoe can be made as good as new. I won't know until I get the canoe into the shop and have everything clamped in place whether or not there is additional damage.

It really bugs me to have damaged one of my canoes through my own carelessness. I know better. The accident didn't have to happen. I just was rushing because I have a lot of preparations to complete before leaving on this trip.

You'd think that I could simply admit the mistake, slow down and resolve not to repeat it. I am capable of taking responsibility for my actions. After all I'm the one who made the canoe and I'm the one who will make the repairs. The canoe will probably get sanded down and get a fresh coat of varnish in the process as well so it'll emerge looking better and ready for many more years of service.

But I keep rethinking the incident in my mind. I woke up this morning thinking about it. I wish I hadn't been so careless. I could have put a safety strap or a bungee on the canoe so it would have stayed in place even if I had to climb down from the ladder. Holding it with one hand while I reached for the tie down with the other was unnecessary. Sure I know that now, but the truth is that I knew it before the accident. I knew that what I was doing involved a risk. It was a risk I didn't need to take.

And this is only a simple example - one that comes to mind as I look at my chosen topic for yesterday's blog. I make mistakes that have far more serious consequences. There have been times in my life when I have gotten so busy that I failed to get to the hospital or jail or nursing home to visit someone. When you are confined the hours go slowly. When you don't get a visit from the pastor it is easy to think that you've been forgotten. I know better. But I am only one person and my days are filled with setting priorities and making decisions about which tasks will be completed and which ones will be put off for the next day. I have even told people that ministry in a congregation the size of ours is a practice of the art of going home with unfinished work every day. The job simply is bigger than I.

The real struggle with forgiveness for me is forgiving myself. I know I could be a better person. I know I should be a better person.

I have had the luxury in my life of being surrounded by people who love and accept me just as I am. I am not the victim of unearned criticism. The family in which I grew up and the family we formed after our marriage both have been very supportive of me. I have served congregations that are loving and forgiving and supportive of their pastor. I know plenty of people who have been starved for approval and acceptance. My life has been extremely fortunate in this regard. You'd think that being surrounded by such good and

forgiving people, I'd learn to follow their example and forgive myself. After all, I'm only human.

Forgiveness, however, is a concept that is hard to put into practice. I'm sure that if I were to be the victim of a crime or deeply injured by the thoughtlessness or carelessness of another I would struggle with forgiving that person as much as I struggle with forgiving myself. I know I can be very harsh of incompetence or lack of preparation, especially when I observe it in others of my own profession.

So far today's blog post reads as if forgiveness depends on me and my actions. It really doesn't work that way at all. Forgiveness belongs to God. The issue is one of trust. God is ready to forgive. I need to accept the gift that has already been offered. I know from experience that when I do open myself to God's forgiveness I am empowered to offer forgiveness to others. Learning to accept forgiveness is an important part of being able to forgive.

May God grant me the grace to accept the forgiveness that is offered. May I learn from that grace for the living of this life.

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May 14, 2017 – Joyful Grandparents

OK, here's an old joke that probably isn't funny at all, and if it is, it is probably funny only to a handful of pastors and theologians.

“Why did God ask Abraham to sacrifice his son?”

“Because if he had asked him to sacrifice his grandson the answer would have been, ‘No way!’”

I don't know if it has any impact on demographics, but we baby boomers, that post-war population swell, as we are aging are becoming grandparents at a high rate. There are more than 27,000 new grandparents in the United States every week. We may have been revolutionaries back in the 1960's and 1970's. At least we pioneered some new attitudes about the role of women in the workplace. The years, however, have gone by and now 40 or 50 years later, we still have some energy for reinventing.

And we are using technology to be present in the lives of our grandchildren in ways that were impossible for previous generations.

In our household the tool is Skype. We video chat with our grandchildren on a regular basis. We read stories over the computer. We make sure that our grandchildren know who we are. We are interested and invested in their lives.

Because of the distance, we don't get to provide childcare for our grandchildren very often, but we look with envy on those in our community who live close enough to be regular caregivers. Trust me, if we lived in the same community as our children, we'd be the babysitter that no one could refuse. We'd beg to come over and we wouldn't charge a dime. We probably would pay for dinner from time to time so the kids would go out and leave the grandkids with us.

I keep saying over and over again and I truly believe it: There's no downside to being a grandfather. I enjoyed being a father. Every stage of our children's development was fun and interesting and challenging. Even the times that were more difficult were intensely rewarding. But there is something very special about being a grandfather. Perhaps I'm a bit more relaxed. Perhaps I have a little more free time in my life now than was the case when our children were young. Perhaps I've learned a bit from the experience of raising our children. Mostly, however, it is because holding a baby is a joyous life-affirming experience.

Yesterday I attended a memorial service for a friend who was a pastor. One of his children spoke eloquently about his hands and how they held so many babies at their baptism. I have to admit that is one of the perks of my job. This morning, I'll get to hold a tiny one and show him off to the congregation. It is an honor to be entrusted with the tiny ones. I'm looking forward to the experience. I joke that I like baptisms more than anyone else in the congregation including the parents. I do enjoy them.

So, dear readers, you'll understand that the pull of those grandchildren is really strong in our lives. We leave this afternoon for a vacation timed to have us present for the birth of a new granddaughter. We've got a few days of driving ahead of us and there is no guarantee that she will wait for us to arrive for her coming out party, but at any rate we should be there for the early days of her life. And she has a brother and a sister, so there will be plenty of grandparent activities to go around. Our eldest grandchild is in kindergarten, and school won't be out for summer vacation, so sleepovers at grandma and grandpa's camper probably have to be on the weekends, but we are eager to spend as much time with our grandchildren as possible.

As a result, the blog will be written every day, but I'm not sure about posting it. It is possible that I'll skip posting on some days and post more than one day's worth on another day. We'll see. I won't stop being a writer, I'll just make getting the blog published first thing in the morning a lower priority than it is when I'm at home and immersed in my working life. Since we have to travel to get from here to there, I will be in places where Internet service is sketchy or non-existent.

I'm not quite ready to hit the road. There's a list of things to do before leaving our home and work behind. But I am eager to be going. The lure of those grandchildren is strong.

Every mother's day I have the privilege of thinking about some of the best mothers in the world. My mother was amazing and taught me so much about this life. We had the joy of her living with us at the end of her life and it is an experience that I will always treasure. There are plenty of men who cringe and tell stories about their mother-in-law. I'm not one of them. I had the best mother-in-law one could imagine. I still joke with my wife and her sisters that I was the favorite child of their parents. They always treated me with deep love and affection. My wife is an amazing mother whose partnership in parenting I have treasured. When it comes to matters of children, I know I can count on her to be loving and caring and filled with good ideas. It was a delight to watch her with our children and it is a delight to watch her with our grandchildren. I have much to celebrate on this Mother's Day.

In our family, we tend to stretch out the generations. My mother was 32 when I was born and 60 when our son was born. Whoopi Goldberg is younger than I and she is already a great-grandmother. Our oldest grandchild is six, so we have a while before we'll enter that category. It is, however, one of the things about aging that I'm looking forward to. And among the other aspects of getting older, it is nice to have something so positive that lies ahead.

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May 15, 2017 – Back to the Place I Began

Yesterday I was talking with a church member before worship and he commented, "No matter how much you travel, you always end up wanting to come back to the place you are born." He was speaking of a sense of having a special connection to a place that I know is real. I'm not completely sure that the desire to go back home is always the strongest desire that a person experiences, however. At least there are plenty of people who don't end up living in the place of their birth at the end of their lives. Our friend Ray was a Dakota boy through and through. He was born in North Dakota and though he lived in Oregon and Minnesota, most of his career was in South Dakota where he really fit in. After he retired, he served interim positions in several states, always returning to his home in South Dakota. Then, he and his wife packed up and moved to a retirement community in Tennessee and not long afterward to a home in North Carolina. He never lost his love for the Dakotas. He never lost his desire to be in the Dakotas. The last time I saw him he spoke of wanting to come back, but it never worked out for him. There are other factors that come to play in one's life.

My mother grew up in Montana. During World War II, she went to California to marry and they spent a couple of years in Oklahoma before returning to Montana. Then she lived in the same town for 45 years. She always referred to herself as a Montanan, but she lived in Oregon and then in South Dakota at the end of her life. The pull of family was stronger than her loyalty to place.

I was thinking about those two yesterday as we drove across southwestern Montana heading out on our trip. We are currently in my home town, parked down by the river where I grew up. Every drive across Montana involves covering a bit of territory. We made 400 miles yesterday afternoon and evening. The country is beautiful. It can be a hot and dry country. It can be a snowy and bleak landscape. But yesterday it was beautiful. The grass is lush and green and even the sagebrush looks like it has been watered. The rivers are running full and the fields are filled with lots of calves and lambs. We kept looking for newborn antelope, but it seems we are just a bit early for those little ones.

Anyway, I went to sleep with the sound of the river that is so familiar that it makes sleeping in this place a special treat for me.

When I stop to think of it, however, I know that things have changed a lot since I left this place. I have lived in our home in South Dakota more years than I lived in Montana. I left this place when I was 17 and although I attended college in Montana those years add up to less than the number of years I have served our congregation in South Dakota. And in my absence things have changed. I noticed decades ago that they were allowing kindergarteners to drive cars and that some of the young adults in town had retired. When I visit there aren't many people on main street who I know, and most of the businesses seem different to me, too. The theatre is an art gallery, the fire station and post office and telephone company all have different purposes. My father's shop has been a thrift store and a pet care place. Locals don't remember that it once was a farm implement and tractor dealership. They've forgotten the feed warehouse and a host of other businesses that seemed so stable and long-standing when I lived here.

Even the sound down by the river isn't the same. Yes, the music of the water over the rocks continues and is so familiar that it takes me back to my childhood. But in my childhood the road at the top of the hill was the major east-west highway in this part of the country and the stream of semi-trucks crossing the bridge as they applied their Jake brakes to slow for town provided their own kind of music. These days the road is quiet and the Interstate highway crosses the river nearly a mile upstream. There are more trains every night than was the case when I was growing up. We used to get one passenger train each way per day and perhaps three or four freight trains per day. These days the stream of coal trains heading to the west coast with coal for export and returning empty is nearly constant. The trains blow their whistles at the river crossing a mile downstream and they seem much closer than the traffic on the Interstate.

The business of the trains is changing as well. Yesterday we saw a train that was completely filled with wind turbine blades passing a coal train. The coal train was headed west and the turbine blades were headed east. The coal train was stopped on a siding to let the other train pass. Each turbine blade took two flatbed cars, equipped with special mounting brackets that allowed the blades to swivel as the train went around curves.

We remain an energy hungry culture, but it is clear that the culture of energy is changing. That huge train with all of those wind turbines was moving because there are folks who think that renewable energy is the way of the future. The expense of an entire train custom outfitted for those especially long items demonstrates that they plan to make many trips and that there is a demand for those turbine blades. The fact that the coal train was stopped for the wind turbines instead of the other way around may have had to do with the length of the trains or the location of the siding, but it seemed to be symbolic of the fact that the world is changing.

I'm home, but it is no longer a place where I linger. After breakfast we'll be on the road again, headed west. There is a lure of the place where you grew up, but there are other things that pull on your heartstrings as well. It seems unlikely that I'll end up in the place where I began.

Even if I did, the place has changed and it is not the same.

Still, it is a great place to visit. I'm glad I'm here right now.

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May 16, 2017 – Crossing the High Desert

The land between the Rocky Mountains and the Cascade Mountains in the western United States is typically dry country. Over the years we've crossed that country on a number of roads on many occasions in Washington, Oregon and California. We've driven all of the major east-west routes across Washington. The prevailing weather pattern is from west to east and the clouds drop their rain or snow as they hit the Cascades. Being lighter and being influenced by the mountain wave pattern, the clouds rise and cross the space between the Cascades and the Rockies without dropping much more moisture until they hit the higher peaks of the Rocky Mountain Spine, where they deposit more on the west slope than the east slope in a pattern similar to what happens with the Cascades.

In Bend, Oregon, there is a wonderful High Desert Museum which explores wildlife, human culture, art and natural resources of the region. It demonstrates the kinds of plants and animals that thrive on the low-moisture environment. Up here in Washington, where we are traveling, there is a bit more moisture and the agriculture shifts from the predominantly cattle-grazing economy of Oregon to some of the world's largest wheat fields. The wheat is grown in rotation in most of this area, with the land laying fallow and storing moisture one year and planted and harvested the next year.

Flowing through the northern high desert is an amazing ancient watershed, the Columbia River. The Columbia river pre-dates the rise of the Cascade mountains.

Whereas some river valleys are formed by the water cutting into the surface, the Columbia gorge was formed by active volcanoes rising up with the river already flowing through the area. Traveling on the highways west from Idaho, one quickly drops from the alpine regions of the Rockies and soon after passing Spokane, the high desert opens up to wheat fields. We left the Interstate behind at Spokane and are crossing Washington on U.S. Highway 2 this trip, which takes us through the little wheat farming communities south of the Spokane Reservation including Reardon, Davenport and Creston. We stopped for the night at Coulee City, south of the Grand Coulee Dam. This morning we'll cross the river near Wenatchee and climb over the Cascades. We'll be at our destination by noon or a little afterward - well ahead of our goal of arriving before our grandson gets out of school for the day.

As I said before, we've crossed this section of the high plains desert many times before in all seasons of the year. We've seen some winter days when the snow was blowing but the roads weren't too bad because the amount of snow was light and the roads blow clear pretty easily. When making such a trip in the winter we worry about the mountain passes, not the desert regions. It can get cold, but usually travel goes pretty smoothly out in the desert. What we remember more, however, are the trips across this region in the summer. Fairly early in our married life we made the trip in a car that had no air conditioning and we were so relieved to finally reach the mountains where the temperatures dropped and our comfort returned. We carried extra water for ourselves and for the car, should we experience a coolant leak.

This trip, however, is very different. We lay in our beds last night listening to a gentle rain falling most of the night. It never rained hard, as is the case with spring thunderstorms in South Dakota. The rain was gentle and there was a little wind in the trees, but nothing that felt like a storm, just gentle raindrops on the camper roof over our head. It was a delicious feeling to fall to sleep warm and dry in our camper.

This kind of rain must feel as if the heavens have opened up and are dropping all their blessings to the farmers who till this land. The timing is perfect for the green wheat that is now about 5 or 6 inches tall. The rain makes everything smell so sweet. As I write this morning, the birds are singing in celebration of the wet morning in a land that doesn't see too many wet mornings.

The name Coulee City reflects the optimism of early 20th Century settlers, not the size of the community of a little over 500 residents. Nonetheless the community has developed a very nice campground right on U.S. highway 2 that is a very convenient stop for travelers. We've stayed in this campground before and enjoyed our visits. This trip the campground is nearly deserted with just the campground hosts and one other camper besides us. It made for a quiet rest and a good stop on our journey.

We love driving through the Cascades. When we have plenty of time, we cut north to Washington highway 2 where the road winds through the peaks in a gorgeous alpine

drive. US 2 is more practical for us on this trip, heading directly to Everett, which lands us on Interstate 5 north of the traffic of Seattle. Although our GPS says it would be quickest to take Interstate 90 directly to Seattle, we don't drive at the maximum speed on the Interstate and we enjoy the lighter traffic of less-traveled roads and we find that we make the trip just as quickly on the well-maintained two lane roads. I'm looking forward to this morning's drive, which will take us through Leavenworth, a delightful community with a Bavarian theme and up over the top of the Cascades at Stevens Pass before descending the Skynomish valley into Everett. From there it is a short drive north to our destination, Mount Vernon.

The power of the little ones to attract us elders is extremely strong. A journey like this is deliciously fun in part because of our anticipation of our arrival. We are so excited to see our grandchildren and have all kinds of adventures planned.

More about that tomorrow . . .

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May 17, 2017 – Gaining Perspective

The birds are singing and it is remarkably quiet here in the RV park where we have settled in Mt. Vernon, Washington. Close to downtown, we are nestled among evergreen trees in a part of our nation that was once mostly temperate rainforest before settlement. I haven't yet learned all of the history of this place but one of the striking features of this region is how close the mountains come to the ocean. When we topped Stevens Pass yesterday in snow squalls, the snow alongside the highway was deeper by several feet than had been the case as we topped the Rockies at Pipestone and Lookout Passes. There is a lot of moisture in this country and the rivers are running full. It is impossible to ignore how much water shapes everything.

A shift in place is good for the spirit. We love our home and we love living in the hills, but taking leave of that place and coming to another gives us the opportunity to once again be reminded how really big the world is and how our lives are lived from a particular perspective. Place shapes who we are. Going to a different place helps us to broaden our perspective.

It seems to me that we are living in a time when narrow perspectives dominate. Political leaders can't seem to engage in meaningful conversations or actions about policies that have long-lasting effects. Short-term profits and short-term consequences seem to be the only thing that are being considered. It is hard to have a meaningful conversation about environmental policy, for example, if you are only looking at the next few years. It is nearly possible to forge consistent foreign policy if you are only focused on the next election. Here in the United States, our House of Representatives are engaged in a continual election cycle. Running every two years means that the only focus of attention

is getting re-elected. Legislators literally start fund-raising for the next election before they start the current term.

Of course there are exorbitant costs to such a narrow point of view. It excludes investment. When one takes a narrow focus on time, there is no distinction between expense and investment. In either case, the cash is gone. The reality that investment produces return escapes one who cannot imagine the future. As a result costs escalate. When funds are expended instead of invested, survival requires more funds.

This blog post is not, however, about political philosophy. It is about the other critical change in perspective that is a gift of this particular trip.

It is about the essential joy of a 60-something grandfather getting down on the floor and giving horsey-back rides to his nearly three-year-old granddaughter. It is about the incredible shift in perspective that comes from sitting with my grandson, to whom I've read countless books over the course of his life, as he reads stories to me with emotion and understanding.

Living in multiple-general communities is essential to the life of the spirit. One of the essential truths of religion is that there is more to God's creation than just ourselves. We belong to a people that has endured for generation after generation and that will continue beyond the span of our own lives. It is a simple truth, but one that we often avoid.

My father died before the birth of my son, but I can see elements of my father's legacy in the children of that son. I can recognize traits that have been passed on through genetics and through the culture of family life. Playing with my grandchildren quickly brings to mind memories of my mother playing with our children when they were young. Those who have gone before have not gone away. They are with us.

It is a few minutes before 9 pm in Japan where our daughter lives. As she is preparing to go to bed after a day's work, I am just going through my morning routine. There is a 19-hour difference in time zones between us. We normally talk when it is evening here and morning there, but we were exchanging a few text messages this morning as I reported on our safe travels to her.

Her presence in our family, however, is more than the moments when we are in direct communication. I recognize personality traits that she shares with her niece. Equally important and equally joyful, I recognize elements of my relationship with my daughter when I observe my son with his daughter.

We belong to a web of relationships that stretches far beyond any single moment or any single place. It is precisely because of the complexity of our relationships that shifting from one perspective to another is so valuable. I am well aware that the ability to make

that change is a privilege that not all people enjoy. We have the financial resources to travel. Not all people would be able to take several weeks away from work or to pay the costs of travel. That privilege has a direct connection with the emphasis on education in which we grew up. Our parents stressed education and our educations have given us options in life that do not exist for those who have not received sufficient education. One of the gifts of education is the expansion of perspective. We can see more options than those who are locked in the grips of oppressive poverty. This privilege we enjoy should not be squandered or taken lightly. We are very fortunate.

My writing will always be a bit philosophical. It is how I process the events of my life and search for meaning in my experiences. For the next few days I suspect that I will be writing more about the joys of travel and the pleasures of family life.

Early in my career, a wise colleague reminded me that being a pastor isn't what you do, it is who you are. Sharing my life with my congregation is part of my pastoral role. Taking an occasional break from daily pastoral duties is essential to keeping perspective.

So I'm writing early this morning (at least in this time zone). That way I'll have a whole day to play with my grandchildren.

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May 18, 2017 – A Busy Place

After supper last evening, our grandson, who is in kindergarten, did a worksheet from school with simple subtraction problems. He understood the principle of subtraction well and soon completed the page of problems without a mistake. Later, he read stories to us. The pattern in their home is that at bedtime he reads two stories, then has one read to him, then reads another and then has a chapter from a longer book read to him. I love story time with our grandchildren. I love to read stories and I love to have him read to me. Last night we were running just a little bit later than usual. Grandparents seem to have this kind of influence. So I was reading to his younger sister while he was reading to Susan to save a little time.

I was trying to remember my own kindergarten experience. I know that we learned colors and numbers and letters. I don't think that we learned reading or arithmetic. Our grandson is a bit older than I was when I went to kindergarten. My birthday is in the summer and his is in February. And he went to preschool where he learned the content that I learned when I was a kindergartener. I don't think I was reading stories when I was his age. I don't think that was doing subtraction until the first grade. I know that I didn't have homework until I was much older than he. I know I didn't have his confidence about riding a school bus. I never rode a bus to school.

The world is changing and it is a bit of a challenge to refrain from the typical grandfather statements like, "When I was your age . . ." I suspect that it will be even more difficult when our grandchildren are teenagers.

Of course one of the main focuses of this young family is waiting. There is a new granddaughter on the way, which of course, is another change. We didn't have advance notification of the gender of our children before their birth. At any rate this family doesn't wait by sitting quietly. Yesterday there was breakfast and getting the grandson to the bus stop, then it was off to an appointment with the midwife and from there we went to toddler swimming time and from swimming lessons back home for lunch and a nap for our granddaughter while we headed down to meet our son for coffee. Then we went back to meet the school bus. There was a snack and some time to play then supper and then homework and showers and toothbrushing and stories and bedtime. And I didn't mention the re-arranging furniture and sorting baby clothes and routine housecleaning that got done somehow around the edges of all of the activity. As soon as we got the children to bed we headed back to the camper and I was ready for bed. And I didn't have any trouble falling asleep.

Today is equally busy. When our daughter-in-law told us all of the activities that are planned, I wondered how she will find time to have that new baby. Being in the final stages of pregnancy doesn't seem to be slowing her down at all.

Mind you this family usually does all of this activity without the benefit of two extra adults. The parents are perfectly capable of juggling work and kids and home chores without grandparents. It is not a schedule for the fainthearted.

But, my-oh-my is it ever fun for us to be a part of all of the activity. I wouldn't trade the experience for anything.

And I know that as the years go by I will have to struggle to keep up. With our grandson doing addition and subtraction in kindergarten, he'll be doing multiplication and division in first and second grade. Throw in a little algebra, geometry and calculus and he'll likely be doing math problems that are beyond my ability before he gets to middle school.

And his philosophical thinking isn't bad, either.

When we arrived he gave us a gift. It was a small toy dog. He said that it was a special toy, one that keeps the owner from having bad dreams. My wife asked him if he needed to keep the toy for himself. He replied that no, he thought that bad dreams can sometimes be a good thing. Then he went on to explain that even though they are hard, sometimes bad dreams help you learn something that you might not be able to learn otherwise. As I listened to their conversation, I thought to myself, "That might be an interesting topic for a blog." Then I thought, "This kid's a philosopher!"

Of course he also is a handful for his parents. I witnessed his well-rehearsed and thoughtful negotiation skills over what he would and would not eat for supper. And I noticed that his sister was listening intently and imitating each step of the negotiations. She is one persistent girl and in a couple of years I won't be surprised to see her in charge of menu planning entirely. I don't think their father ever had the benefit of negotiable menus. We simply made a supper plan, prepared the meal and served it. There might have been some negotiation over dessert, but it took the form of "Eat four more bites or there'll be no dessert."

The wonderful thing about all of this activity is that it is truly energy-giving. Sure we get tired. But we also are energized by the opportunity to share the life of our children and grandchildren. I don't think I was capable of imagining this stage of life when our children were young and we were struggling to keep up with the busy pace of balancing children and work and the other demands of life. The bottom line is that it is wonderfully fun to be a grandfather and to participate in their life.

I couldn't have chosen a better way to spend my vacation.

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May 19, 2017 – Waiting

Our new granddaughter has not yet been born, but she is already exerting her influence on our lives. We are at the "any day now" stage. And we know that "any day" means it could be today. And it could not be today. She is active enough to disrupt her mother's sleep which in turn disrupts her father's sleep. The parents share their tiredness with the children. The grandparents, here to help, are a bit more tired than usual because they are experiencing a change in pace from their usual work life to the life of caring for grandchildren. Everybody was a bit tired last night. There were a few more tears at bedtime for the children. Grandpa read didn't read as much of his magazine before crawling into bed. Grandma was ready for her tea as soon as we got back to the camper for the evening. We know that the little one is having an impact on our lives.

Which, of course, is as it should be. Babies are supposed to be disruptive. They come into this world in such a way that they demand our attention and our attention is required for their health and survival. Humans are unique among all of the animals in terms of the length of the journey of childhood. The baby deer that will be born in our yard over the course of the next month will be able to walk within minutes of their birth. They will be eating grass within a month and fully weaned by the end of the summer. They'll hang around with their mothers for the first couple of years, but by then they'll be getting old enough for adult life.

Human babies take a couple of decades to get to adulthood and some take several more years than that. They are dependent for a long time.

Since we know this, there is lots of anticipation when a new baby is expected. We wonder about her personality. Will she be easy-going or high-strung? Will she be assertive or more passive? There is so much that we don't know. Surprise is part of the joy of anticipation.

There is something deeply human about the mood of waiting. In the church we find this to be one of the human experiences that is significant enough to warrant a season of practice each year. Advent is about learning the skills and emotions of waiting. As we prepare for Christmas we recall the anticipation of Jesus family, his religious community, and indeed the whole world. But we also recall for ourselves the power and beauty of anticipation. We practice a necessary life skill - learning to wait.

Jesus spoke of anticipation fairly frequently. "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour," Jesus said as the conclusion of the parable of the ten bridesmaids. Being ready - preparing - and then learning to wait is an essential human skill.

So we don't know when the baby will come and that gives a special meaning to our days here. We have a huge luxury of being able to take an extended vacation and to come a long distance to share in that waiting.

Of course life goes on as we wait. There are others who are doing the work of the church and keeping things running in our absence. Our son gets up and goes to work each day knowing that any day now he might need to take extra time away from the usual pace of office chores, meetings, and daily work. The cars are still going by on the freeway every day. The stores restock their shelves. The airplanes fly overhead. The news reporters craft the latest events into words. The disruption that we anticipate itself is part of the normal pace of the world. Babies are born. People die. Life goes on.

We, however, are paying special attention to one birth, one life, one tiny little one who already has become the focus of our attention and the center of our love. She will be born into a family with a long legacy of love. She carries some of the genetic material of her great-grandparents and those who went before. She is a unique expression of the love of a family that has known generations of love. And she will take her place in a family that has been waiting and preparing for her birth for a long time already.

The checklists are complete. The baby clothes are arranged. The birth kit is packed in its bag. The supplies are purchased. Tiny diapers are ready for the time. The tiny baby bed is out of storage and set up with a clean sheet. A new rocking chair is in place and has been carefully tested by her brother and sister. The grandparents have arrived the care for the siblings is arranged. The phones are kept by the bedside every night in anticipation of what we know is coming. Still, there are tasks that must be done each day. We plan activities and events for the children. We play with the toys and pick them up before bedtime each day. We are not bored as we wait.

Sometimes the little one occupies a little space in our consciousness. Waiting has become a familiar friend and a recognized feeling. Sometimes, with a stretch or a kick, she asserts her presence in a way that her mother cannot ignore and the rest of us in turn give our attention. Each of us is thinking of her in our own ways. We check the calendar, wondering which day will become her birthday - the unique day of her coming into the world - a day that we will celebrate from this time forward.

This waiting is a delicious experience for grandpa. He preaches about waiting every year. He likes to talk and think about the quality of anticipation. The real-life experience, however, is far sweeter than all of the talk. The reality is much better than the words.

Sometimes you don't need any more words. You just need to wait.

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May 20, 2017 – Children are Welcome

In our travels we have discovered a wide variety of different RV parks. Actually we prefer campgrounds when we are out and about. We don't need paved roads, sprinkler systems to keep the grass green, water, sewer and electrical plug-ins, or other amenities if what we are doing is stopping for one or two nights. However, when we are going to be in the same place for a week or more, it is nice to have some basic services for our camper. Usually we select a campground by taking a look at the directory and reading about what is available. One thing that we look for is what amenities are offered for children. Having grandchildren means that we make use of swimming pools, playgrounds and bicycle paths. And when we are traveling without our grandchildren we find that being in a place that is family-friendly with other children is the kind of mood we prefer.

However, on this trip, we selected our current parking place by its address. We wanted to have a place that is very close to our son and daughter-in-law's home as we wait for the new baby to arrive. We know that we may be called to make a quick trip to their home in the middle of the night, so we want to be ready. This is a lovely RV Park with all of the amenities for campers. But it is clearly geared to senior RV users. There is no playground and no community room. Essentially it is a large parking lot for really big RVs with small strips of grass and trees and a single picnic table for each rig. It seems to be completely full every night with a few rigs that are more permanently parked, with porches and skirting. Most of the RVs are a lot bigger than our trailer. Our trailer, which seems large to us, is dwarfed by all of the 5th-wheel trailers and class A motorcoaches. That is no worry to us. We have no need to keep up with the neighbors and are very happy in our little camper.

One of our favorite features of our camper is that it has a separate room with two sets of bunkbeds for visiting grandchildren. And last night and this morning two of the beds are occupied. We often visit during the summer, but this trip is during the school year, so our grandson is only available to stay in the camper when there is no school the next day. Tonight was his first opportunity since we arrived and, as expected, his sister wanted to camp with grandma and grandpa as well. It is, for us, an amazingly wonderful treat to have them visit.

We kicked the soccer ball around the yard and our camper has plenty of toys and activities for children. We've become pretty good at stocking the toy cupboard with entertaining items for grandchildren. And I have a reputation, known among all of my grandchildren, for making "the best pancakes in the world" for breakfast. Our grandson began staying in our camper when he was 2 years old and his sister, who is nearly three is equally comfortable with us. Their parents are wonderfully generous with their children and, I suspect, don't mind an occasional evening when the children are away with grandparents.

The campground, however, suggests to me what a senior citizen community might feel like. It is set up for people who come in with their campers, set up all of their slide-outs, connect all of the utilities, aim their satellite dishes for the best television reception, and then disappear into their private space. There is very little interaction between the campers. We are very close to each other in terms of physical space, but we don't have any conversations beyond a simple greeting or an occasional complement, usually about the RV or tow vehicle of our neighbor.

I imagine that the other people in the RV park are like us. Their children have been raised and they are a couple out exploring the world. Some of them have pets, but most do not.

Staying here has gotten me thinking about the ways our communities divide up by age and interest. Mount Vernon, where our son lives, is a lovely community with a vibrant and eclectic downtown area, thriving schools and a growing population. It has a lot of subdivisions, many of them relatively new, that cater to retired people. "A community for over 55" is a common phrase on the signs identifying subdivisions. In Washington State it is illegal to have a neighborhood that is segregated by age, so if younger people wanted to buy into the subdivision, they would be allowed to do so. However, the focus in those subdivisions is upon families without children. Small yards, no parks within walking distance, and locations that are a bit farther away from schools attract families without children.

My dream retirement home, however, would be in a place where the neighbors have children. As our children have become adults, I find myself hungry for opportunities to be around other people's children. Fortunately I have a job where parents bring their children and I get to interact with them in church programs and activities. I am privileged

to sit with teens as they explore some of the deep meanings of life and to hear their perspective on the events of the day. I get to hold the tiny babies and eat cookies with the toddlers during fellowship time after worship each week. I watch parents with their children and see them grow up.

I know that in future visits to this area we will find other places to park our camper. Even if we have to drive a bit farther, we will enjoy finding places with playgrounds and other kid-friendly attractions. In the meantime, there is no problem having our grandchildren over to the camper. I think that the neighbors actually enjoy it. I know I would if they had their grandchildren come along.

And for those who don't have any children to come and visit, I feel a little sorry for them . . . but only a little.

I may not make the best pancakes in the world, but I do have the best grandchildren in the world.

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May 21, 2017 – Dividing the Chores

When our children were fairly young, we took a camping trip one vacation. We visited Crater Lake in Oregon and a couple of other spaces. I don't remember the exact timing of the vacation, but the weather was cool. The morning we woke near Crater Lake was pretty cold. Another night on the trip, I set up tents in the rain as the children sat in the car to keep dry. My mother was along for the trip as well. Like many other camping trips, there were challenges, but the trip itself was a success. We remember it fondly and were glad that we were able to make the trip. On that particular trip, we divided the chores up in a pattern that we had established in earlier camping trips which continues in part today. When we arrived at our camp site, I focused my attention in getting the tent set up while my wife cared for the children and their needs. Once the tent was set up, she and the children would go inside the tent and roll out sleeping bags and prepare the space in the tent while I set up the camp stove, made a fire and prepared our meal. It was a practical division of labor that made sense when there were two small children who needed care.

Over the years we have fallen into a pattern, which is very comfortable to us, of my doing most of the cooking when we are camping. Our current camper is equipped with a modern, easy-to-use galley and, outside of a somewhat quirky oven with a pilot light that is difficult to light, preparing meals is very similar to cooking at home. Still, when we are camping I tend to do a bit more of the cooking.

Having grandchildren, however, gives us the freedom of dividing chores and doing things a bit differently than was the case when our children were tiny. Much of our

grandparent duties, when the children are staying with us, come naturally. We both love reading stories and are reasonably competent at helping little ones get dressed. Much of our camping time is playing games and planning adventures, and we don't have as many chores to occupy our time as is the case when we are at home.

Once in a while, I discover that there are areas of family life where, even after decades of being a father, I lack some necessary skills. Yesterday, as we prepared for the day, my granddaughter asked me to fix her hair. Since my wife was right there, I suggested that she might help with the hair. Our granddaughter asked again for me.

I can do a lot of things, but I haven't got a clue about how to properly put rubber bands into a little girl's hair to make it the way she wants it. I don't even do a good job of keeping my own hair combed. As I walk out of the shop after a haircut it looks the best that it will look until I return for another haircut. With a laugh, I deferred to my wife, who deftly combed and arranged the hair to our granddaughter's satisfaction.

The kids do like my cooking and eat well when they are visiting in the camper.

Being grandparents doesn't involve all of the responsibilities of parents. Even though the grandchildren get to spend the night at the camper, during the day we go back to their home and their parents share in the childcare duties. Still, raising children takes a lot of energy. We find that we're pretty tired at the end of the day and sleep comes easily. Being on vacation frees us from the routine of our regular jobs and gives us extra time to focus on caring for the children. It also gives us great respect for our son and daughter-in-law, who balance their professional careers with child raising duties in a graceful manner. We've forgotten how much hard work is involved in keeping the balance of life when caring for little ones.

A sleepover at grandma's and grandpa's camper is a real treat for the parents. And, of course, it is a great treat for the grandparents as well, even though some of our skills are a bit rusty.

We, of course, have great luxury and privilege in our lives. We have the ability to travel great distances to visit our grandchildren. We have modern technology to keep us connected when we are apart. We have a camper to serve as a home-away-from-home for us and for our grandchildren. And we work in a profession that allows for longer vacations for rest and renewal. It all fits together for our family. There are plenty of families who live much closer to the edge of survival for whom grandparents caring for children is the only practical option as they struggle to make ends meet and work out ways of keeping up with the demands of work and childcare and some sort of reasonable rest and recreation.

One thing that comes to my mind as we take responsibility for caring for our grandchildren for short amount of time is how much respect I have for single parents

who have to be always on for their children. It is a real challenge to care for the kids even when we know that we have the parents for back up. And we have each other to divide the chores and keep watch over each other. We never found ourselves in a position to have to go it alone with parenting and work and the other balances of life. We've learned to work together and to divide up the chores. I'm sure I could learn to fix a little girl's hair, but I don't really have to have that skill to be seen by my grandchildren as a competent adult. I'm sure my wife can prepare a meal and keep the children safe and occupied at the same time, but she doesn't have to do it very often.

On another front, we are all waiting, waiting, waiting for that new grandchild to be born. Perhaps today is the day. Perhaps not. We will see. Anticipation is a powerful part of our lives.

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May 22, 2017 – A Beautiful Place

On the southern edge of Mount Vernon is a tree-covered hill known locally as "Little Mountain." The hill is part of the Cascade mountains that rise quickly from the ocean shoreline in this part of Washington to heights of over 10,000 feet. The little mountain is a rather impressive urban park of over 500 acres that rises about a thousand feet above the surrounding town. There is a road that goes to the top of the peak, and a couple of well-placed observation platforms that afford an impressive view of the city below, the Skagit River valley, and the land stretching to the Puget Sound with the San Juan islands off in the distance. Hiking and biking trails provide access to the park to give a wonderful mountain experience in the midst of a growing urban area. The park is a treasure of the community where many of the residents remember fondly the people who donated the land to create it.

After enjoying a short walk and the view from Little Mountain, our Sunday afternoon adventure took us to La Connor. The town is located on the Swinomish Channel with Fidalgo Island across the water. A beautiful arched bridge connects the Island to the mainland at La Connor. The French-sounding name is a bit of a local joke. The community was originally named Swinomish from the local Native tribe. J.S. Conner bought the settlement's trading post and in 1870 had the name changed to honor his wife, Louisa Ann Conner. The French-appearing "La" represents her first- and middle-initials.

La Connor's businesses mostly cater to the many tourists who come to view the picturesque town and bridge and to walk its boardwalk and view the many boats that take shelter in the channel. It provided a fun visit for our crew of six with two small children who enjoyed looking at the boats and being outdoors.

Admiring the beautiful place to which our son and daughter-in-law have moved, we commented on the location between the mountains and the ocean. Our grandson added, "It's a perfect place because there are thousands and thousands of flowers that somebody else plants and takes care of." He was referring to the tulip fields which their family had recently visited that lie between their home and La Connor. The blossoms are now off of the tulips, which are raised for bulbs which are sold as ornamental plants around the country.

It is, undeniably, a beautiful place. One of the things that our grandchildren will one day learn is that there are many beautiful places in the world. We are inspired by the drive between their home and our own, which is another beautiful place with lots and lots of beauty on the routes between. It is, however, gratifying to know that our grandchildren have appreciation for the beauty that surrounds them and realize what a privilege it is to have access to such beauty in your everyday life.

Of course life goes on amidst the beauty. I was awakened this morning by the whistle of a train. There are many trains that go through this town, mostly carrying refined petroleum products from the Shell and Tesoro refineries located on Fidalgo Island at Anacortes. Although the City of Mount Vernon has only a little over 30,000 residents, it is right next to Burlington and other cities and towns are very close. Not far to the south is Everett and the greater Seattle area with a combined population of over 800,000 people. All of those people require a lot of goods and services and the flow of trains on the tracks and trucks on the Interstate highway never ceases.

Four years ago, on May 23, 2013, the Interstate 5 bridge over the Skagit River at Mount Vernon collapsed, sending three vehicles into the water below. Fortunately all of the occupants of the vehicles survived and the repair of the bridge was accomplished in record time. It took about a month to have the highway open to traffic again. During the construction, however, all of the traffic of the Interstate had to be routed through the cities of Burlington and Mount Vernon to cross the river on a local street. It was a reminder of just how much traffic there is flowing by the city every day.

There is much to the history of this place. The Skagit River was an important source of food for native people when the salmon began their upstream migration to spawning grounds. Later, when European settlers arrived, the region was valued for its timber production. The fertile plains stretching towards the ocean were ripe for farming and the mild climate iterated settlers. There have been some dramatic floods of the Skagit River and flood control is an important part of the city's infrastructure. Construction of additional retaining walls continues.

These days the community is attractive to people retiring from active work lives in Seattle and other communities. There are a number of subdivisions in the town that offer reasonably-priced housing (at least compared to housing costs in Seattle).

Our son and daughter-in-law were brought to the community by his work. He is the director of the community library which is in the heart of downtown right next to city hall. They moved to the community at the end of February and are beginning to settle in to their new home. We have the joy of helping them explore the region and discover with them some of the features of the area.

And the theme of this visit, at least so far, is waiting, waiting, waiting. Yesterday was the due date predicted by the doctors, but babies have their own schedules and this one wasn't constrained by those predictions. There is, for us as grandparents, a delicious quality to the waiting. We are enjoying our other grandchildren and the visit to this beautiful place while we wait.

And, in the back of my mind, I'm thinking of what I will write in this blog on the day after the birth.

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May 23, 2017 – Finding My Way

Today is one week since we arrived in Mount Vernon. It was a totally new place to me when we first got here. I was using my GPS to get from the campground to our son's home for a while. Now I can find that route plus a few more important routes around town without assistance. I've gotten a sense of direction about the place and identified a few landmarks that help me to get around. I know that over the years to come as we visit multiple times the area will become familiar to me. It just takes a little time to get oriented.

Yesterday, as I was running errands, I realized that things that had previously confused me were now becoming clear. I had the choice of multiple routes to get to the same destination. I could take a "wrong turn" and then find my way to my destination. It is all a part of orienting myself to this place. The locals, who have lived here for some time, do this all the time. If they have an errand that takes them away from their usual return, it doesn't mean that they have to go back to their starting place to find their way. They simply know where they are going and how to get there. They can plan complex routes and they can make adjustments when traffic or circumstances change.

I'm not at risk of being confused with a local, but I'm a bit less like a newcomer now that I've had some time to figure my way around.

I remember our move to Chicago many years ago. I was intimidated by the city. The first trip into the city, I was driving a borrowed pickup truck and I was all alone. I had a AAA map of the city and had studied it and planned my route. A friend had told me about listening to the radio on my way into the city so that I could get traffic updates. I did so, thinking to myself that the updates would do me no good. I had my route in my head

and the map on the seat next to me and I didn't have an alternate route planned. If the traffic got bad, I'd likely drive right into the traffic jam. After four years of living in the city, there were many routes that I could drive without having the map open next to myself. I still kept it handy for directions and learned to look up things quickly on the map by learning about Chicago's number and grid systems.

These days the maps are on our electronic devices. I don't have paper maps of our travels with me on this trip. I have my cell phone as a back up to my GPS device in the truck. Sometimes, when I'm heading out to a new place I will use both devices to see if they offer different routes to the same destination. I've become quite confident in their assistance to get me where I am going.

Reading maps and using electronic devices are important skills for those who would navigate this world, but there are other skills that help keep one from getting lost. My father was a good teacher for me. He was constantly talking about situational awareness, and asking me where I was as we traveled. We would fly in an airplane from our home airport down to Yellowstone National Park, check the park for any signs of fire and then fly back by a different route, looking for smoke as we went. My father would constantly quiz me on our location, asking me to name the different creeks and streams as we crossed them and pointing out the various river drainages. When we were on the ground, hiking or hunting or exploring the wilderness, he would make sure that I knew which way to go to find our vehicle. I learned about following stream courses to get out of the mountains and how walking game trails was easier than heading out across country. The most convenient route is not always a straight line. The phrase "as a crow flies," doesn't take into account the way a crow really flies, which is rarely simply from point A to point B. The crow takes into account the wind and can be distracted by the presence of food and other items along the route.

Life, of course, is even more challenging than geography. It is quite possible to get lost in life and lose one's sense of direction. I have long thought that I would have a "map" for my retirement when I got to be this age. My father planned and talked about his retirement for a long time before he began to sell off his business interests and shift to more retirement activities. What I witnessed in him, however, was that things didn't go according to plan. An unforeseen illness sidetracked his plans and he didn't live long enough to enjoy retirement. Perhaps it was my experience with him that has shaped my sense of needing a great deal of flexibility about the next phase of my life. Whatever the reasons, I find myself forging ahead with my career even though I'm getting close to the time to make that retirement shift. I have less of a plan and less of a sense of direction than I have for some other phases of my life.

I also have less worry. I'm confident that there are many different possible routes and that we will find one that works for us. I'm very fortunate to be in a profession where one doesn't have to retire all at once. Changes can be made and there are ways to work at different sized jobs and adjust to circumstances.

A David Wagoner poem comes to mind:

Lost

by *David Wagoner*, from *Collected Poems 1956-1976*

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,
Must ask permission to know it and be known.
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,
I have made this place around you.
If you leave it, you may come back again, saying Here.
No two trees are the same to Raven.
No two branches are the same to Wren.
If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows
Where you are. You must let it find you.

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May 24, 2017 – Eliza



Dearest Eliza,

By the time you are old enough to read this, you will have already learned that you have both a big brother and a big sister. You may have even gotten used to being the third child in your family. Sometimes you may even find it annoying that grownups get you mixed up with your sister from time to time or that they are always comparing you to them. You know that you are a unique and wondrous person with thoughts, feelings and intentions that are all your own. But there are some things that your grandpa wants to tell you that he wrote to Elliot in his day-after-birth letter and Emma in her day-after-birth letter. Both of them heard about the love into which they were born and that the love of your family is a reflection of a legacy of love. Of course you know that your mother and father and brother and sister love you very much. And your grandmothers and grandfathers love you very much, too. And all of your aunts and uncles. But there is more to the story than all of that love.

Long ago, before anyone even knew that you would someday be born your grandparents were loved and treasured by their parents. That is true of your great grandparents as well and all of the generations of people who came before them. Your family has a great legacy of love and all of that love is an important part of the love in which you were brought into this world.

We waited with great expectations for your birth and when the news arrived that you were born we celebrated with great joy. Your sister and brother were in the camper with your grandmother and me when you were born and your parents had a few moments on that first night to get to know you and to focus their attention on you alone. The rest of us waited with great excitement until the next morning to meet you face to face, to hold you, and to tell you how much we love you.

But there is something more that your grandpa wants you to know, because you provide a very important and unique perspective to our family. Your birth means that there are three children in your family and three is a special number. When there was only one child in your family, Elliot was alone in his generation. When there were only two children in your family, Emmala and Elliot often competed for attention, for toys and for time. It seemed like they always wanted to play with the same thing at the same time. There were sometime tears. Of course they loved each other very much and they had a lot of fun together, too, but there was something about being one of two children that left your family feeling like it was somehow incomplete. Your coming into the family changed everything and the change was very good.

For your grandpa, three is a sacred number. You will one day learn all about his job as a minister and the things that he believes and teaches to other people, but part of that faith is a special understanding of the number three. When you were born, he was on vacation and one of the things that he knew at the time was that on his first Sunday back at his work he would be preaching a Trinity Sunday sermon - that is a special Sunday each year when Christians celebrate the power and wonder of three.

The number three helps us to understand God. Even though no one has seen God and we don't fully understand all that there is to God, we can understand a little bit of God by considering the number three.

You make the number of children in your family three. Before you there were only two children. So on the day you were born, your grandpa was celebrating the number three in a very special way.

Here are just a few ways in which we were thinking of the number three when you were born.

Your sister, Emmala was almost three years old when you were born. Her birthday was just a couple of weeks away. Your grandpa was sixty-three when you were born. Your Aunt Rachel was thirty-three. And if you add three plus three you get six. Elliot was six when you were born. Your mother and your father were thirty six when you were born as was Uncle Mike. And your grandmother Susan was sixty-six. There were a lot of threes and sixes in your family when we were celebrating your birth into the world.

So three is a very important number and it is your number. Never forget how special that makes you.

Perhaps one day you will begin to understand how much we were excited when you were born. You might even experience the excitement and joy of waiting for a baby to be born into your life some day. One of the things about being with your family to greet your birth is that we can imagine many different wonderful things that you might do and see in your life. But there is much that we don't know. We don't know what jobs you will do or what people you will meet. We don't know all of the places that you will travel or adventures that you will experience. Our imaginations are busy and working hard, but we know that you are more than we can ever imagine.

So welcome to this world, little one. We are so delighted that you are here. And we hope that we never lose the excitement and wonder that your birth has brought into our lives. We pray that you will always remember how much you are loved and how important it is to be the third child in your family. We hope that you will carry the legacy of love into which you were born with you wherever you go and pass it on to new generations of our family.

We love you, precious one. Joy, joy, joy!

Grandpa Ted

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May 25, 2017 – Gaining Perspective

When our son was born, the newborn infant intimidated my youngest brother. He was intrigued by the baby, but it was so small and vulnerable, that he wasn't sure he wanted to actually touch the little thing. He came to visit not long after the birth and each time I tried to hand the baby to him he refused. One evening, however, he was lying on the floor in a crowd of relatives and I simply took the baby and placed it on his chest. He put out his hands to steady the baby and a look of joy spread across his face. A few years later, he got married and in the course of time became the father of three. When his own sons and daughter were born he had overcome that nervousness about holding a baby and turned into a very good father. I remember seeing him with his own daughter as an infant and being amazed at the contrast between that scene and the first time he held our infant son.

Babies teach us some very important life lessons and one of those lessons is that each individual changes things for all of us. When a new life comes into this world, we are all affected by that new person. Yesterday, as we all marveled at the new infant born into our family, I was deeply aware of how an infant participates in obtaining the care that is needed. This little one doesn't have much volume to her cry. Her sister and brother are

capable of being much louder than she, but any little noise from her gets the full attention of all of the people in the room. The fact that she is so tiny brings out the nurturer in all of us, even her siblings, who were instantly gentle and who wanted to hold and cuddle and comfort the baby. With us as grandparents around, the baby didn't get put down much at all yesterday. There was always someone who wanted to hold her and the feeling of holding that baby was simply wonderful.

The issues of politics and work and even some of the household chores all took a back seat to care for the baby. Her mother, naturally tired from the process of labor didn't have to worry about her everyday routines. There was always another adult available to fetch groceries, prepare a meal and clean up the dishes. We all pitched in to meet the school bus, care for the dog, do a load of laundry and other chores that are a part of everyday life. Her father took the day off from work to be with his family and the work load was light.

I realize that the privilege of such support is not afforded to every family. We have the luxury of jobs that have generous vacation benefits and the ability to travel to be with our family. We have the technology to draw us together. For a while yesterday afternoon, we had my daughter on Skype as she prepared to go to her job in Japan and got to see her new niece and be a part of our family gathering. There are plenty of people in this world who don't have such luxury and plenty of babies born into families that don't have so much support.

Still, it is amazing that children thrive in the midst of some very trying situations. There is something in their nature that triggers our nurturing response and stirs us to want to protect and care for them. That nurturing tendency is, in part, biological, but not exclusively so. I clearly remember how quickly that nurturing instinct came alive for me when we adopted our daughter. I spent much of the first night she was with us sitting by her bed, watching her. When she stirred, my response was instant. I was very tired, but there was something more important than sleep in my life. This new responsibility captivated me fully.

One of the things about being the grandpa in this scenario is that I am also acutely aware at how quickly time passes. I know that there will be some long nights ahead for the parents. I know that they will have a lot of work to accomplish to raise their children. I have watched their six-year-old's journey since he was an infant and now that it is a short time before he is a teenager and an adult himself. The years will go by quickly. Nothing reminds me of that more than watching my son in his role as a father. I can remember when he was born. I can remember his being a tiny infant. Now I marvel as I watch him handle that new baby with confidence and assurance. I marvel as I witness him reading stories to his other children and getting them settled in bed and giving them the attention that they need. He has grown up into a responsible adult. But he is no less of a miracle than he was the day he was born.

My grandparents and parents have all passed from this life. Their years are over. But their presence is deeply felt when I am with these little ones. I remember my mother rushing to help us out when our son was born. I can picture her holding him on the first day of his life. I know that the instinct to be present for these times came from those who loved and cared for me when I was young. I feel how much delight my father, who died before our son was born, would have at this young family and all of its struggles and joys. I feel their presence every day and even more intensely at these significant moments of our lives.

Today is a good day to simply pause and enjoy the moment. Yes life is fleeting. Yes there are many things that need to be done. But if you take time to pick up a baby, you'll remember that just being is a wonderful experience. Tomorrow will come, but for now today is precious.

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May 26, 2017 – Remembering Star Wars

Forty years ago we stayed in Chicago for the summer. It was the academic break between our third and fourth years of theological seminary. I had completed the requirements for my Masters of Divinity Degree and was focusing on my Doctor of Ministry Degree. I was working at the Wholistic Health Care Center in Hinsdale, Illinois and doing research for my professional paper. I was anticipating what would happen when I graduated: where I would go, what kind of ministry I would pursue, how I would put together a career. My advisor at the Health Care Center was urging me strongly to plan for at least three or four years service as a pastor of a local congregation to build my practical experience after eight years of full-time academic studies.

Spending the summer in Chicago was an adventure for us. We moved again that May - from our third-floor walk-up in an old home with no air conditioning to the third floor of the apartment building next door - also with no air conditioning. A box fan in the window of an apartment with no cross ventilation would have to suffice for us, though we had a lead on a house-sitting opportunity for a month in the middle of the summer where there was air conditioning. The commute from our apartment to Hinsdale Union Church was 25 miles and took about 35 minutes because I was going the opposite direction of the predominant flow of traffic. I made the trip six days a week. Did I mention that our car had no air conditioning?

All of this is to say that it didn't enter my mind on May 25, 1977, to make the trip west to Los Angeles to Aveco Cinema Center to catch the opening of a new film called Star Wars. I'm not sure that I watched any movies that year. I wasn't keeping up with the industry at all. I've never been what you might call a movie buff anyway and I was spending more time in libraries than in movie theaters. I'm not even sure if I saw the

poster for the film, proclaiming, “Coming Soon to a Galaxy Near You” that summer, though I do have some memory of it.

I suppose that I should have been more aware of popular culture, but in my defense, the movie wasn't expected to be as big as it turned out. 20th Century Fox wasn't sure what to do with it. There was quite a bit of doubt whether or not it would be a commercial success. The premier was limited to 40 theaters and the release date was rushed in an attempt to get it out before the expected glut of summer blockbusters.

I finally watched the movie more than a year later after my family and friends urged me to do so. It was a cool movie and I enjoyed it. I wouldn't say it was a life-changing event for me, however.

I was vaguely aware of the work of Joseph Campbell, not from any of my own reading, but from references to him in other works. He was considered to be an expert in comparative mythology and although I had some interest in the role of myth in the Old Testament Canon, I wasn't particularly intrigued by looking for common threads in the mythologies of multiple cultures at the time. It was years before I waded through Campbell's collected works after his death.

I was, however, interested in the cultural phenomenon of the movie. It achieved so much popular success that one had to have a familiarity with its themes in order to carry on an intelligent conversation in some circles. When the second movie in the original trilogy came out in the spring of 1980, I was much quicker to get to a theater and watch. That summer was a busy time in my life. My father was struggling with the cancer that would kill him later that year, we had just learned that we were expecting our first child, and I was trying to balance a job at which I was still fairly fresh and my responsibilities as a son and soon-to-be father. We still didn't have air conditioning in our home or car and the movie theater was air conditioned. I thoroughly enjoyed the movie and purchased a copy of the sound track on cassette tape to play in the car as I made the trips back and forth from our home in North Dakota to my parents' home in Montana. It wasn't exactly the sound track of my life, but I began to experience the sense of the universal story of which Campbell had written.

Joseph Campbell was a huge influence on the life and work of George Lucas and the Star Wars Films were a quest to tell an old story in a new way. I'm not sure that I accept Campbell's thesis that there is a universal story that is told and embraced in all human cultures, with specific details and adaptations to each, but I know that there are certain basic elements of life that we share with a lot of other people. I've never been one to claim that the truths I have discovered in this life apply to everyone, though there are plenty of Christian ministers who would make that claim. And if there is a single story that is the basic mythology of all cultures, I'm pretty sure that it isn't fully captured by any movie. The medium is great for storytelling, but it has its limits. No matter how well-crafted a movie is, it is no substitute for lived experience. I know that first hand as I lived

through the death of my father and the birth of our son during the years that the first trilogy of Star Wars films were released.

However, because of the timing of the release of the films and the events of my life I can look back now, from the perspective of 40 years later, and recognize that there is a sense in which I grew up with my understanding of the themes of the movies.

Happy 40th anniversary Star Wars. i'm grateful for the stories the movies have told. And, now, 40 years later I'm joyfully engaged in a new chapter of my own epic journey with the birth of a new granddaughter.

The story goes on.

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May 27, 2017 – An Independent Spirit

“Papa Ted, I can do it all by myself!” our almost-three-year-old granddaughter announces. Last evening it was in reference to climbing up into her car seat in the back of our pickup truck. It is a pretty good climb. The running boards on the truck are above her waist. From standing on the running boards she has to mount the floor of the truck, then the seat and finally crawl up into her car seat. It would take just a few seconds to pick her up and set her in the seat. But she is indignant when I try to do just that. She wants to master her world, which includes choosing clothes and dressing herself to the extent she is able, carrying her own “pack pack” in which are the things she needs for an overnight with her grandparents, and walking when it would take far less time to carry her. Her attitude commands respect.

It is a quality that is going to be important for her in this life. She is used to being the younger sister and not quite being able to do all of the things of which her brother is capable. Now things have changed. There is a new baby sister and her parents will need her to have a certain degree of independence to make the family system work. When you have three children to load into car seats, it makes a big difference to have a six-year-old who can buckle his own seatbelt and a three-year-old who can crawl into her seat by herself. When you go grocery shopping with three little ones, it requires that the older ones be able to carry some of the groceries so mom has a free hand to carry the youngest.

Grandpa has the luxury of being able to observe and reflect on the process of growing. There is something very natural and deep-seated inside of us that desires independence. We want to be able to do things for ourselves. We like the freedom of not being dependent on others. At the same time, we also want to contribute to our community. We want to do things that genuinely help. And we don't want to go it alone. That same little person who stamps her foot and announces that she can do it by

herself, wants a response when she offers a hug and desires attention when she has something to say. Papa Ted is beginning to think of her as “She who cannot be ignored.” She wants her independence and she wants to be in relationship. Both qualities are essential to her way of life.

Yesterday, while the oldest of our grandchildren was in school and the parents were caring for the newborn, we had some time with our granddaughter. We went to a park where she played and ran in the open space and then headed to our camper for lunch. On most visits to the camper, her brother has been along, so she was enjoying a little time to explore things on her own. The camper has no television set and no need of one. There are plenty of other things to do. Grandma has equipped it with age-appropriate toys and even brought along a big bag of dress-up clothes. I was delightfully entertained by a little blond-headed one who was dressed in high heel shoes almost big enough to put both feet in the same shoe, a black and silver skirt, a pirate’s sash and pirate’s hat, carrying a pink purse and a “booty bag” filled with “treasure.” In this case the treasure was a number of pay dishes including a cake pan, plates, cups and saucers and a small teapot.

Life is good for grandpa.

Of course, from an adult perspective, there are still a lot of things that she cannot do, and her world is filled with contradictions. The same little one who announced “I need privacy!” to undress for her bath, ran naked through the camper past open windows a few minutes later. She had to make sure that she had exactly the same size portion for her supper as her big brother, but wasn’t really hungry enough to eat all of the food on her plate. She can be independent and insist on climbing into the car seat by herself and a few minutes later be too tired to climb back down and go limp as a rag when you try to pick her up.

She is, however, making her way in this world in a most delightful fashion.

A year ago, I struggled to make out a few words that she was saying. Now we have long conversations. I can remember when she couldn’t stand without something to hold on to. Now I have to run to keep up with her. Having a big brother who can read has made books more interesting to her and she shows signs of wanting to read that I didn’t notice in her brother at this age. She’s got numbers and counting and colors down before she is old enough to go to preschool.

I could turn this blog into a full-blown brag session. I am unashamed to brag about my grandchildren to my friends. More interesting to me, however, is the opportunity to observe how we humans develop and grow. It is natural for us to want to help and participate in community. We are driven to significant relationships. We need to love and be loved. We are naturally curious and desire to learn. We are creative and come

up with new ideas easily. Watching our grandchildren grow reminds me of my growing edges and my desire to learn in community.

Add another 25 years or so and many of our roles will be reversed. She'll be helping me with my seatbelt while I struggle with increasing disability and decreasing independence. She does, however, give me every incentive to take care of my health and stay active for as long as possible. After all, if grandchildren are this much fun, one can't help but look forward to great grandchildren!

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May 28, 2017 – Persistence

The seminary we attended had a lab preschool. Such schools are no longer common at theological seminaries, but it wasn't the only one in its day. The theory was that by having a school that itself was a learning and research institution, producing professional papers and opportunities for students to work directly with children in a supervised setting the seminary would advance Christian Education as a profession and teach students necessary skills for serving churches. I took the course in preschool education as a student and later, when my wife was working in the preschool I spent quite a bit of time photographing children in the center. Some of my photographs were used as illustrations in the book "The Young Child as Person," by Martha Snyder, director of the preschool.

Part of the process of the school was going to lunch after the children had gone home for the day. Each lunch had a regular agenda of reviewing the morning's activities and learnings and processing that information so that it could be used to learn from the experiences of the day. Professors Ross and Martha Snyder presided at those luncheons and guided the adults who had been in the school that day through the formal process.

I remember one of those preschool sessions that involved a discussion of persistence. We had been speaking of language development. One of the students in the school came from a home of an international student from South Africa and Zulu was the language commonly spoken in their home. The young girl was becoming proficient in English, but there were a few words that were more challenging for her. One of the concepts was that of hot and cold. The words don't exactly line up with the Zulu, which has a word for temperature extremes that applies to both hot and cold. The English words came into focus for the child one day as she was engaging in water play at a sink designed for children, with warm and cold water that were restricted in temperature so the children would not be injured by water that was too hot. She would alternately turn on and off the two faucets and say the words hot and cold. Once she discovered the meaning of the words, she demonstrated that process to everyone in the room, including me, who was a photographic observer. She insisted that I put my hands into

the running water just as she had for the other children in the room as she correctly said the words hot and cold.

As we discussed the discovery, we examined the concept of persistence. She had demonstrated persistence as she worked out the meaning of the words over several days' worth of play in the preschool. It was noted that children have a special quality of persistence that comes from the ability to focus attention without giving in to distractions. Whereas adults continually have a host of distractions in their minds as they go through their daily routines, children have a quality of presentness that allows them to focus intently on one thing without having their attention diffused by everyday concerns.

Persistence is not the same thing as unchanging. The repetition involved in learning the concepts of hot and cold was not exactly doing the same thing over and over, because the understanding was growing and the perception of the child was changing.

A few months ago I encountered the concept of persistence in an entirely different context. I was reading Robin Wall Kimmerer's "Gathering Moss," a book that is equally a botany text and a discussion of cultural history. She was reporting on research that was conducted on the community of plants that she discovered growing next to a river in Wisconsin. Kimmerer took the plants to her laboratory to study them and when she propagated them in the lab one species dominated in a way that it did not in the natural setting. Curious, Kimmerer began to think of the conditions that existed alongside the river and to recreate them in her experimental setting. After much trial and error, she discovered that the natural flood cycle was what allowed the balance of the plant community. The plant that dominated in the lab was not so dominant when exposed to a cycle of flood and drought that allowed another moss to flourish. She wrote of the persistence of the moss that was able to go dormant during drought cycles and flourish during times of flooding. This persistence was a valuable quality of the plant that allowed the wider community of plants to remain healthy. Plants are the foundation of the food cycle for all living things and Kimmerer's research in mosses and other plants expands our understanding of how our world works.

The concept of persistence has been on my mind for the past ten days as I have enjoyed spending time each day with our grandchildren. Like the young girl in the preschool, our grandchildren are persistent about their learning. Yesterday we went with the children to a roller skating rink where they had a special time for preschoolers to experience skating. It takes some time for children to learn to skate and the rink has several aids to assist the children. There is a carpeted area that offers more resistance to the rolling than the hardwood floor. There are frames with wheels that the children can use for balance. And there are patient instructors who have experience with helping children learn. The children started out on the floor, getting into a crawling stance and standing up one foot at a time. They learned to pick up one skate while standing on the other and to bend their knees as they skated. Within in a few minutes they were making

progress around the rink. The learning was easily visible over the course of an hour and a half. I was impressed with the learning. I was also impressed with the children's ability to stick with the process without becoming overly discouraged or frustrated.

Of course as adults we cannot go back to being children. We carry with us our past experiences and the pressures of daily living. But there is much we can learn from the focus and persistence of children. Being with them and observing them is as valuable today as it was back when I was a student in the lab school.

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May 29, 2017 – Memorial Day 2017

When I was a freshman in high school, I began to play taps for military ceremonies in our town. There were still a few World War I veterans in our town and from time to time one would die of natural causes. It was the height of the Vietnam War and we had a few funerals for soldiers who died in combat. Over the years, I've bugled for veterans of World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and Desert Storm.

I don't think it is that way these days, but back then, our small town made a big deal over memorial day. We had a parade down main street, which was the next-to-the-last performance for our high school band of the year. Graduation was the final performance. The parade ended at the Legion Hall, where there were a few speeches. Then an honor guard gave a 21 gun salute and we played taps. We used two trumpets in two locations and played with an echo effect. Then we got into cars and rode to the cemetery, where a wreath was laid, a salute fired and taps played again. Finally, we went down to the bridge over the Yellowstone River and a wreath was thrown into the river and as it floated out of sight downstream the salute was fired and we played taps for the third time.

I only participated in the ceremony three times. After that, I was off to college and since then I have not been called upon for such duties.

I have played taps for plenty of military funerals over the years since, however. My first parish was in a small town where, like my home town, there were no members of veterans organizations available to play taps. I gladly volunteered for the duty and was called on from time to time to render honors. I play less frequently these days, but have a trumpet in my office and can play when called upon.

These days most veterans organizations have bagels that play a recorded version of taps electronically when a button is pushed and the ceremony is done without an actual person blowing air through an instrument. I am not a fan of the sound quality of those machines and the emotionless way in which the tribute is rendered, but I am not a veteran and it is not my place to comment on the ceremonies they lead.

I have, however, hung out with veterans enough to have some understanding of the importance of the day for them. For those who have served in combat the observance has a direct connection to people they actually knew who have been killed in battle. Many of those veterans witnessed first hand the trauma of the loss of one of their colleagues and the knowledge that they also could have died. The ways in which wars are fought these days are significantly different than was the case for our fathers' and grandfathers' generations, but war still involves violence and death.

For the old guys, those of the World War I and World War II generations, the ceremonies that took place away from the cemetery - at the Legion Hall and on the bridge over the river - were deeply moving because they had lost compatriots whose bodies never made it to formal cemeteries. Some died in far-away places before there were systems for returning bodies home for burial. Some were not identified following the confusion of battle. Others went down in ships that were sunk and the bodies never recovered. The veterans had real memories of people they had known who were lost as one of the costs of war.

Most people understand why we have two different holidays that draw attention to veterans each year. Some, however, are not aware of the distinction between the two and why two different days are required. Veterans Day, held in November, is a day to thank all veterans for their service to our country. It is a day to celebrate the safe return of those who have served in distant places and to honor their sacrifices. Memorial Day has an entirely different character. It is a day of remembrance of those who have died. Such remembrances are always tinged with grief and a bit of sadness. For those who served in combat and witnessed the deaths of others, the day can be part of a life-long process of dealing with trauma and grief. War changes everyone who is involved and the change is permanent.

Remembering, however, is an important part of living with grief. One of the fears of those who have lost loved ones is that this person, who was once so vital and important and beloved, might be forgotten. Of course we do not forget, but we fear that we might. Setting aside a day of remembrance helps to keep alive the commitment to never forget.

Those World War I veterans who used to lead our small town Memorial Day parade are no longer living and there aren't many of the World War II veterans left anymore, either. The memories that were so precious and meaningful to them have been passed on to a new generation. In a small way, I am one of the keepers of their memories. I don't remember their fallen buddies, but I do remember the somber attitude and the deep respect that they used to show as the notes of taps echoed off of the hills and faded into silence. Even as a high school student I understood that I was participating in a sacred process. Now, as one who is approaching the age they were at the time, I understand

the process of memory and the importance of memorials much better than I did back then.

Yesterday we drove past a ceremony that was decorated with lots of flags and flowers and our grandson commented on the decorations. I tried to explain to him that the decorations were for memorial day and that remembering is important to those who have experienced loss. He responded with a six-year-old understanding of death, "But they can never talk to those people again." "Yes," I responded. "That is true. But they can remember and remembering is important to those who have lost someone they loved."

So to all of you who have experienced loss and grief, I won't use the phrase "Happy Memorial Day." And to all of the veterans, I'll save "Thank you for your service," for Veterans Day. Instead, I pray that you will have a meaningful day. Know that I'm available to share your silence and to remember those who have gone before.

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May 30, 2017 – Holding the Baby

I remember being a new father and thinking to myself that I didn't know what I would do if something bad ever happened to the tiny one I held in my arms. I remember looking at the tiny hands and feet over and over and marveling at the complexity and vulnerability of the little one. I remember taking special care when crossing a street or parking lot while holding the child so that there would be no tripping, no unexpected splashes from puddles and no need to rush. I remember being aware of my driving and taking special care of the precious cargo carefully loaded into the car seat in the back seat of the car.

Of course now that our children are in their thirties, I have a different way of thinking about them. I don't have the same constant awareness of my role and responsibility as their father that I once possessed. I don't wake in the night with a start and get up to go check to see if they are breathing. I don't worry as much as once was the case. I still marvel at the blessing of their continuing good health and wonder what their future may hold.

I was thinking these and similar thoughts as I was holding our new granddaughter. Today she is one week old. Holding that tiny one on my chest as she sleeps is one of the best feelings in the world. I am intensely aware of her. I can count her breaths. I can set aside all of the normal cares and concerns of life and just focus my attention on that warm little one resting against me. There are many wonderful and meaningful embraces in this life and holding a tiny baby is one of the greatest. In the last couple of days she has been stretching out and showing her full length. For the first few days, she kept her knees bent and was all curled up into a tiny ball, the position that was most familiar to her. After a week of exploring the wider world, she is beginning to stretch and move her

arms and legs. Although her brain probably isn't processing fully-focused images yet, she is opening her eyes more and beginning to use visual clues to get a sense of what is going on in her world.

I know that in a week we will need to head back home to our regular lives and jobs and she will continue to grow and amaze her parents and we won't be there every day to witness the miracle of her growth, but for now I'm reveling in the luxury of being here and witnessing the everyday miracles of a newborn person making her way in the world.

I know that her days won't always be easy. I know that the world won't always be kind to her. I know she will face challenges and problems and experience pain and loss. But the instinct to shield and protect her is very strong. Right now, if she is lying in her bassinet and makes a little peep as we are eating dinner, four adults respond within seconds. She doesn't want for anything as her parents and grandparents make sure she is clean and fed and comfortable.

We have the luxury of being four adults with only three children at the moment. That luxury will quickly change. Her father returns to his usual work schedule today. Her grandparents will leave in another week. There will be plenty of three-to-one times for the children as they grow up. But her big brother is in a full-day kindergarten program and boards the bus for school in the morning and is gone until mid afternoon five days a week. And her sister is capable of playing and entertaining herself for significant blocks of time. She'll get plenty of time with her mother holding her. And I know, from personal experience, that her father will come home from work eager to pick her up and take care of her. Being three decades younger than his father, he has more energy for the sleep-deprived nights and long days that lie ahead.

For now, however, I have time to think about how marvelous it is that birth is the way humans come into this world. In need of constant nurture and care, we are thrust into relationships where we need to be able to depend on one another. We may encounter greed and selfishness and cut-throat dealings in our relationships in the business and political worlds, but in our home lives, we are invited to relationships of love and care and sacrifice. Fortunately, most of us are given the gift of encountering family relationships long before we have to deal with some of life's harsher and more conflicted relationships. There have been plenty of studies and analyses of what occurs when children are deprived of these essentials of love and care in their early lives.

As I hold the tiny one, I am filled with a sense of contentment. There are some big crises in this world. A cyclone is battering Bangladesh, a refugee ship caught fire off of the coast of Spain, there was a deadly attack in Iraq, a zoo worker was killed by a tiger. There is unrest and danger and tragedy all around. By grace, however, I am allowed to set aside my thoughts of all of those things in order to focus my attention on the little one sleeping in my arms.

It reminds me how much better this world would be if our politicians spent less time raising money from wealthy donors and more time holding babies. It may even be helping me become a better preacher, though that is yet to be revealed. For now there is no other motive to hold the baby other than the simple fact that it is good for both of us. We are good for each other.

She is a blessing not only to me, but to the whole world.

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May 31, 2017 – Time

The passage of time and how we have chosen to measure it is still a bit of a mystery to our granddaughters. The youngest, just a week old, has no language skills with which to discuss the passage of time and her main interest at this point seems to be eating. When she isn't sleeping, her little mouth is going, searching for a source of food. We have no way of knowing whether or not she has any perception of time. She is just beginning to experience the concept of otherness, having known being a part of her mother's body for more time than she has known independent life.

Her older sister is trying very hard to understand the concept of time. She's got "next" down pretty solidly. Sometimes she struggles with a string of things that happen before the thing she wants, especially if that string has more than a couple of items. If you say to her, "We're going to eat lunch, then you'll have stories and a nap and after that we'll go pick up your brother at the bus stop," she is likely to go get her shoes and coat for the walk to the bus stop. She likes to "fast forward" to the items she wants to have happen. Still she does have a concept of "not yet."

We've had several discussions recently that involve time. Over the weekend we reminded her that her birthday party was next week. She took that to mean next day and was thrown and a bit disappointed when she got up and there were no party preparations underway. At a bare minimum, she expected balloons. She knows she is two years old, but doesn't yet understand what it means to be three years old or how close that is to her new reality.

After her sister was born, I congratulated her on becoming a big sister and she immediately corrected me, saying, "No! I'm the little sister!" She wasn't about to allow me to undermine her position in the family. She likes the fact that there is a new baby in the family and calls her sister "my baby," but she doesn't quite know what that means for her position in the family. After all, she just became the middle kid. Having been the middle kid in my family, I'm inclined to give her a bit of extra attention as she adjusts to the transition.

Being immersed in a family with a new baby is a good lesson for me and a constant reminder that the entire concept of time is a human construct. There isn't some absolute reality that is time. We have devised instruments to measure the passage of time and they work well for scientific exploration. The accuracy of modern digital timepieces is astounding. And we have agreed on a common language to discuss time that works well enough to keep trains and planes running on schedule and passengers arrive and depart in a somewhat orderly fashion.

On the other hand, we are aware that there are significant differences in the quality of time. 20 minutes of holding a sleeping baby feels different than 20 minutes of waiting in a doctor's office. A half hour reading stories to your grandchildren is qualitatively different than a half hour in the dentist's chair getting your teeth cleaned. Next week seems impossibly far away to a two-year-old and incredibly near to her grandfather. And any amount of time feels still different to her parents who are adjusting to a whole new cycle of interruption of their sleep every night.

Clocks and calendars work well for science. They are less effective for some other functions.

When we travel to Costa Rica to participate in the life of our sister church, we become aware of the differences in the interpretation of time. Worship in that church rarely starts in a fashion that we would call "on time." About 20 minutes after the advertised time is common. Once it gets started, it isn't restricted by the clock, either. Worship continues until it is finished. All of the songs and all of the prayers and all of the readings and all of the preaching need to be completed before worship is over. That might take 45 minutes and it might take two hours. It just depends. One of the lessons that gringos have to learn when visiting Central America is that although a Spanish-English dictionary translates mañana as "tomorrow," that isn't what it means in common usage. Mañana simply means "not today." It could be tomorrow. It could be next week. It could be next month. The speaker doesn't indicate what day mañana means other than it means "not today."

I've been reading a book about dinosaurs to our grandson recently. The book is large and our reading time only allows for a half dozen pages each evening, so it will take a while to get through it. Most pages give an overview of multiple geological time eras and discuss various aspects of evolution and development, from the movement of continents to varieties of plant life to the emergence and disappearance of dinosaurs. The book uses the letters MYA to designate "millions of years ago." The Jurassic period, 200 to 145 MYA was the height of the age of dinosaurs. I'm not sure what such a long amount of time means to a six year old, but I know that his 63-year-old grandpa is having to stretch his imagination quite a bit to imagine what such a long amount of time could mean. I do better with smaller numbers. Another factoid from the book is that the distance across the Atlantic Ocean is about 30 inches farther than it was when Christopher Columbus set off on his voyage of discovery. I sort of understand 30

inches. I even have some concept of the 1,200 miles we drove to get from our home to where we are now. I'm not sure I can translate that into the approximately 4,280 miles of Columbus' 1492/93 trip from Spain to various Islands in the Caribbean, but I've got a pretty good idea how far 30 inches is. I'm thinking Columbus wouldn't notice the difference.

None of us know how much longer our lives will last or how the passage of that time will feel. For now, it is sufficient to enjoy the time that we have and I know I'm treasuring these days with our grandchildren.

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