

When I was... I went On a Journey
Sunday Morning Story,
“On the Journey” Retreat
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“The Lord is my shepherd... who leads me beside still waters and restores my soul.” Psalm 23.

When I was three years old I went on a journey. Actually, I didn't go on the journey. My parents took me. World War II was over. My parents had moved from Washington, D.C. back to Newton, Kansas. My dad worked for Midland Mutual Life Insurance. I don't know if he worked in their administration or if he sold life insurance. I did learn later that after having been in D.C., he didn't want to be in Newton, Kansas, and now we were moving

I remember the little white house with green shutters where we lived and the pedal car I got when I was three (bring little replica toy), which I called my Pontiac. I remember making a snowman with my mother that winter and getting stones from the garden for the eyes. That's all I remember of being three in Newton.

The next thing I remember is being at my grandparents' farm in nearby Buhler, Kansas, a little farming town of 500 people where my parents grew up. There was a trailer in the farm yard, and everyone was packing it up with our belongings. My parents put a crib mattress in the back seat of our 1941 green Ford coupe where I spent the next three days. There were no children's car seats or even seat belts at the time. I spent my time playing with a little truck on that mattress. I can even remember the sensation of animal cracker crumbs sticking to my bare legs. I remember looking out the back window of the car and seeing the outline of my little Pontiac pedal car under the tarp that covered the trailer with everything we owned.

I had no idea where we were going or what this journey meant. I can only imagine now what my parents and grandparents thought. I'm sure my grandparents wondered what would become of our family connection. My dad had taken a job with the relief agency, CARE in New York City, fourteen hundred miles away. We would be living in Brooklyn. There were no cell-phones or e-mail, let alone Skype.

I doubt if my parents spoke to their parents long distance even twelve times a year from New York. My grandmother visited us once, when my sisters were born. My grandfather never came to NY in the five years between our move and when he died.

My dad negotiated a month's vacation in his new job, and my parents promised to use it to return to Kansas every summer, which they did. I know that my Mennonite grandparents also assumed that I would be lost to the city's wicked ways.

I remember my dad driving up to our apartment in Brooklyn at the end of our journey. I don't actually recall the next part, but it's been told so many times that it seems real to me. We evidently got out of the car and were standing on the sidewalk. As my dad was pointing up to the sixth floor where we would live, a man walked up behind us to our trailer, grabbed our tarp, and ran down the alley. My dad, who was all of five foot six and weighed about 135 lbs, chased him and demanded the tarp back. The man apologized, saying he thought the tarp belonged to Con. Ed., the electric company, which in New York ethics made it okay to steal. His name was Dick Rieter. He turned out to be our next door neighbor who along with his wife Ruth and daughter Hillary, who was my age, became our family's best friends.

I know my dad wanted to get out of small town Kansas in the worst way. He told me that throughout his life. Yet he developed a case of ulcers on his advance trip to interview for this job and find an apartment for us, serious enough that his landlady found him collapsed in his apartment and called an ambulance to rush him to the hospital. Yet he would never admit that he was stressed out about this job or move, a form of emotional denial I have somewhat inherited.

I imagine my mother was frightened and excited at the same time, probably more worried about missing home than my dad was.

Overall it was an exhilarating chapter in my family's life. I remember my mom taking me to Fifth Avenue in Manhattan to ride on the top level of a double decker bus. I remember my dad coming home one Saturday with a baseball, bat and glove and taking me to nearby Prospect Park to learn how to hit, throw, and catch. I remember going to Ebbett's Field to see the Brooklyn Dodgers play.

The big event, of course was the birth of my twin sisters when I was four and a half, making it five of us in that one bedroom apartment. My dad sold the Ford and got something called a Jeep Station Wagon that had been used for in town deliveries by his office at CARE. It was an early version of an SUV, and my folks could slide a double baby carriage in the back to take us all to the beach at Coney Island on a Sunday afternoon.

I remember that there was a hole in the inside wheel well in the way back of the Jeep, and I could see the tire turning when we rode. In fact, don't tell anyone else this, but if I had to go to the bathroom on a long trip, my dad would tell me to just pee through that hole.

Years later, when our own son Matt was three years old and Chris was three months old, Sandy and I took a journey similar to the one my parents made. We came from New Milford, Connecticut to Gainesville, Florida. It was during the energy crisis of 1974, when there were long lines at gas stations in Connecticut, and sometimes you couldn't buy more than three gallons of gas at a time. We didn't know if we could find enough gas to make it to Florida, because the New Jersey Turnpike

wouldn't let you buy more than \$2.00 worth of gas, so we took something called the Auto Train.

The Auto Train left from northern Virginia. We carefully filled up our Volvo with gas in Connecticut, stopped at my parents' house in New Jersey to say our goodbyes and get more gas. We then drove to Sandy's parents' house in Silver Spring, Maryland. There her dad and uncle had cans of gas they used to top off our tank, because the train would arrive in Florida on Sunday when many stations around us in Connecticut had been closed.

Like my grandparents, Sandy's parents watched us wistfully as our car was loaded onto the Auto Train and we found our seats in one of the coaches. It was 11 degrees when we left Maryland. The next morning, on January 4, our train arrived in Sanford, Florida. Sandy asked me if she needed to put the snowsuit on the baby. I looked out the window and saw a baby in a stroller wearing nothing but a diaper. It was 85 degrees outside.

When we began driving from Sanford to Gainesville that Sunday, we passed gas station after gas station with no cars at the pumps. We figured that they had no gas, so we babied the car along to conserve gas. Finally, when we were getting low, I stopped at another station, empty of cars, but with a clerk inside. Assuming they had no gas I asked if she could tell me any place I might find a few gallons to get me to Gainesville. The clerk looked at me rather astonished and said all the stations had all the gas we wanted, including this one. The gas crisis of 1974 seemed to be limited to the states in proximity to Massachusetts, the only state that had voted for George McGovern over Richard Nixon.

Nobody stole anything from us when we pulled up in Gainesville, but there were remarkable culture shocks in store for us. The first day I went to work, Sandy discovered a snake under three month old Christopher's crib. She summoned up bravery she never knew she had nor needed in Connecticut and swept the snake across the terrazzo floor and out the front door. She did call me at work to ask just what kind of place I had brought her to.

My journey at age three with my parents and my journey as a parent with Sandy and our three year old and three month old were all acts of faith. Neither my parents nor Sandy and I knew what we would find at the other end of our travels. Neither my parents nor Sandy and I knew how we would keep track of our families and who we were.

But these journeys changed our lives and led us into exciting new paths of life and faith. It seems that at some point in time God leads everyone on a journey, whether it is to a far away place, or a new idea, a new school, or a new chapter in one's life.

Every one of you here today took a journey to come to this retreat. You decided to pack up the whole family into the mini van, or yourself into your own car, or your single duffle bag, catching a ride with someone else. You left the ordinary, the routine, the familiar, and the

comfortable. And once you were here, you decided on more journeys, which groups you would attend, whom you would sit down to eat with, what new people you would get to know, and what new callings of God you would allow yourself to hear.

This retreat is at times both exciting and scary for every one of us. The only thing certain is that in sacrificing the comfort and familiarity of home, we grow in wisdom, faith and connection with something deeper inside ourselves we understand as God.

Whether this is your first retreat, fifth, or like me the thirty sixth UCG retreat, it's always a little uncertain and challenging. And retreat always opens a place in my life for God to call me in a new way. Retreat is always, I believe, a place of unexpected grace if we but let ourselves receive it.

This retreat has been different again, as each retreat is, but even more so because we moved the whole thing to North Camp. You had to find new places to nest and rest. Even back here at our outdoor chapel by the lake in South Camp, we're adjusting to a new setting for God to speak to us.

So remember everyone - every good story begins with the words, one day when I was three, or thirteen, or thirty, or forty, or fifty, or sixty, or seventy, or eighty, I went on a journey. On that journey God led me to new paths of growth and meaning. And because God cared for me and gave me comfort on this journey, I can trust that God will do the same for every journey yet to come, large or small.

All of this reminds me of two of the quotes listed on the back of the name tags - the first is a poem for Yom Kippur, the Jewish New Year. "Looking backward or ahead, we see that Victory lies not in some high place along the way, but in having made the Journey, stage by stage."

The second is from scripture. Repeat it after me.

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