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Texts: Isaiah 35: 8-10; Isaiah 40: 1-3; Isaiah 42: 16a

December 4, 2022

On and Off Ramps of the Holy Highway

There is a stretch of the New Jersey Turnpike that has always fascinated me. Down around exit 4 or 5, there's a moment where the Turnpike parallels I-295. You can look over and see cars on the other highway, and for a moment it looks as though we're all moving toward the same destination. It's a little bit like seeing into an alternate dimension, as cars in a parallel universe momentarily align with ours, and then are diverted elsewhere. You can see it, but you can't access it. The road is right there - right over there, so close that you could hit it with a rock. And yet, you can't just cross the divide. If you are to get over there, presuming you wanted to, you'd have to access unseen roads that might - might - take you there. But you can't just cross over.

That's come to seem like a metaphor of the spiritual life to me. You can see and admire people who have a rich interior or spiritual life - those people who seem to be more attuned to the heartbeat of the world than others. They're the ones who somehow burn brighter, the ones who inspire us with their words or their deeds, their art or their quiet ability to listen, and to absorb what others are saying. You admire them, you admire what's in them, but you can't just cross from one way of being to another, from one highway to another in order to access it for yourself. There's a process one must undergo to get there, a series of on and off ramps, connector roads, back roads, and the like, that lead to the road, the way of being, that you wish to be on.

That all came to mind a few weeks ago in our Bible study here at the church. We puzzled over one of the passages we just heard from the book of Isaiah: "a highway shall be there," the text says, "and it shall be the Holy Way." What is this highway, we wondered? And then we also noticed a few other places where highways are mentioned. "Make straight in the desert a highway," chapter forty puts it. And then later, in chapter 42, we find what seems to be a secret road - "by paths they do not know I will guide them," the text reads. By paths they do not know... What are these paths, these roads, these highways that we do not know? What is this secret way that we cannot quite access? It's a little like seeing I-295 from the Turnpike - if that road really does exist over there, how, exactly, do we get there?

To answer those questions, I'd like to revisit a story that I shared with you this past summer. Many of you will remember that our family had a misadventure, departing for a road trip to Colorado, only to be turned around when I tested positive for Covid. I spent the next week and a half on the third floor of the parsonage, reading James Joyce's *Ulysses*. What happened to me during that week and a half has been the source of a great deal of reflection on my part. It was unexpected, but for me, incredibly important. I watched no TV and saw no movies. I had few conversations. I went online only sporadically. For the most part, all I did was read - very slowly. It helped that I loved the book itself, but more than that, it felt as if something that I had lost had been restored. It was the ability to concentrate, to focus for a long time, upon something that, to me, felt worthy of concentration. "I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself the king of infinite space," Hamlet says at one point in the play that bears his name. I don't always feel that way, but this summer, I came to understand exactly what he

meant. With *Ulysses* in my hand, I too felt boundless, and I counted myself the king of infinite space. It felt like being in a state of grace, like having stumbled upon that holy way, the secret highway of being that Isaiah writes about.

That stretch of solitude and concentration was important, but so was what followed. When my quarantine was over, we departed once again for a radically curtailed version of our road trip. But instead of feeling excited and relieved, I was agitated by what felt like a conspiracy meant to break, and then to actively prevent, that rich interior world from ever being experienced. I felt as though I had been forced off one pathway, and herded onto another. At a rest stop on the Merritt Parkway, I remember feeling positively assaulted by the nonsense language that surrounded me. A television positioned by the Subway counter was broadcasting gas station news about nothing, or at least nothing of any import - the dating life of Tiktok users, the sale of some sporting franchise, the need to purchase Pringles. It was, if you will, speech and language crowded and pressed into a zone that would otherwise have been filled only with the conversations of other travelers. Back out on the road, I began to notice all the language scattered across the backs and the sides of trucks - to buy something, think something, be something, do something. I saw the same things on the billboards that rolled past us - endless miles of what amounts to nonsense chatter, all of it trying to capture and absorb everyone's attention. It was like being at a crowded dinner table where everyone was speaking all at once, and to no one in particular. I made for a poor travel companion that day, grouchy and condescending, and Rachael let me know it. Some of you may be tempted to do the same by the time I'm through!

Even so, I've continued to ponder it all: what was it about that period of quiet that felt so good? Did it disclose a profound need that is not mine alone, but that we all somehow share? Was that experience akin, somehow, to discovering that secret path, that hidden highway of being in Isaiah's prophecy? And did that experience at the Merritt rest stop disclose another truth, that somehow we're up against forces within our world that are actively designed to reroute us, away from that path, thus preventing us from entering or experiencing that zone of quiet concentration, in which we can at last begin to hear from ourselves once again? These are questions that have to do with literacy, of course, but I believe they also have to do with religion, with democracy, and with Advent itself. More on those themes in just a bit.

Not long ago, I encountered the work of a literacy scholar at UCLA named Maryanne Wolf. She's helped me to understand what it is I experienced this summer, but she also helped me to understand what many of us, perhaps most of us, are dealing with in this technological moment. Wolf is the author of a book called *Reader, Come Home*, and she sat for an extended interview recently with Ezra Klein. She spends a lot of time thinking and writing about what happens to us during periods of deep concentration. Her argument has to do with reading, of course, but her research is suggestive for other domains as well - for music, say, or being absorbed in solving some problem or other, and also for the dimension of life that we name "religion."

Here's what she says.¹ Many of us read quite a bit, even if we never pick up a book. I don't know about you, but I often find myself scrolling through information on my phone or computer or even in print form, quickly digesting the main points of an article or a text or a post so that I can respond. Wolf calls that form of reading skimming. We skim the surface of words for information. Another writer, Nicholas Carr, calls it "the shallows." Like Wolf, Carr argues

¹ Insights from the following three paragraphs are drawn from "Transcript: Ezra Klein Interviews Maryanne Wolf," *The New York Times*, November 22, 2022.

that we exist in a moment of cultural “shallowing,” where we only scan for information at the most superficial of levels. It’s something we all do at this point, and in truth, we need to do it to function well. Scanning, skimming, shallowing - these are specific, and very important skills that we’ve had to acquire in the digital age, and there’s no giving it up. I’ll confess that as a minister, I require the ability to scan and skim so as to know what’s happening in the world at any given moment, and what I, what we, might need to respond to. It’s a useful skill.

But Wolf also highlights a different kind of experience, what she calls deep reading. That’s the kind of reading that requires our sustained attention. It requires us to slow our minds down. It requires us to shut certain things out, at least for a brief period. With such periods of attention, we absorb ideas more fully. We have time to formulate our own responses. We sit with the consciousness of another human being, an author. And that, in turn, strengthens our ability to imagine the lives of others. In other words, according to Wolf, in periods of deep reading, our creativity is activated. Our empathy is activated. And our ability to hear from ourselves is activated. That inner state is where our own best insights about ourselves and about the world come into existence. It is, truly, an essential domain of what it means to live a fully engaged human life.

So what happens when we can no longer give ourselves to something like deep reading - or deep listening, or deep concentration upon much of anything? According to Wolf, it’s like an entire dimension of our existence goes missing. We have a sanctuary within ourselves. We possess a marvelous landscape inside of us. It is, perhaps, a kind of holy highway of being. To be educated, then, in the deepest sense of the word, is not simply to warehouse information that we can later dispense on the job or at cocktail parties, important as those might be. Instead, the fundamental purpose of education is the formation of our personhood. It is, if you will, the formation of the soul. It is the slow and painstaking creation of that space within ourselves where epiphanies can take place, where aha moments can occur, where our sense of being becomes expansive, oceanic even. It’s the place where we become most associative in our thoughts, most open to flashes of insight. But when we can only scan for information and salient points, we can no longer access that sanctuary, that holy way, if you will - and we suffer for it. In a way, we become strangers to ourselves - lost, restless, agitated, distracted. Such a condition has potentially catastrophic consequences for democracy, many of which are unfolding around us. But it also has implications for religion.

I would argue that the domain of the spirit Maryanne Wolf is describing is the very same place within us that gives birth to religious experience. To be sure, as William James once reminded us, there are many varieties of religious experience, and so we must be careful about reducing religion to any one thing or any one kind of experience. But I would say that if we become trapped only within the realm of scanning, only within the realm of skimming, only within the realm of the “shallows,” we lose not only a primary source of our intellect. We lose one of the primary places of our being, the place from which much that we call religious experience emerges.

Now, when I say religious experience, I don’t mean going to the church or the synagogue or the mosque. Those are the things that tend to follow upon religious experience. Instead, I’m talking about something prior to that, those moments that occur every now and again within a human life where we somehow sense our place within the cosmos, where a sense of our deep interconnection with the rest of the world is revealed, where we sense a deep and pervasive grace that upholds our existence. It is like Alyosha, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, who, in a moment of profound grief, feels something, someone, who touches his heart. It is like Pierre, in *War and*

Peace, who undergoes the shock of warfare and captivity, and who thereafter discovers a wellspring of compassion emerging within him that he can only attribute to something beyond himself, to God. Such moments are the condition for the existence of things like churches, synagogues and mosques. It is from such experiences that religion itself comes into being. But if we render ourselves incapable of receiving such experiences, if we only dwell on the level of skimming, skipping through the shallows, we strip ourselves of the very capacity to recognize, or even to undergo an experience of the deep. After that, only the form of religion will remain, but not the substance. Only the husk shall remain, but not the kernel, the skin, but not the guts. Without that inner experience, in other words, we cut ourselves off from the domain which gave birth to the mystics and prophets, to the poets and artists. We become mere functionaries, religious bureaucrats, the hollow and stuffed men and women of T. S. Eliot's famous poem.

What, then, are we to do? Say we long to have those experiences of depth. Say we can see that other, that secret highway running parallel to us, and wish to get on it. How are we to do so? And say that we have lives, as I do, that preclude long stretches of time for deep reading, or deep listening, or deep anything? What then?

I think it comes down to guarding ourselves, to protecting some small corner of our lives that is not governed or filled with activity or noise. I think it comes down to preserving, at the very least, a tiny domain of our existence that becomes accustomed to slowness of thought. I think it comes down to cultivating a secret space within our hearts, one that may steadily grow over time, that is ours alone, where we are still enough to be in conversation with ourselves, and maybe with the consciousness of another. The ways we go about those things will be different - some of us will do it through slow reading - even 20 minutes a day would get us there - while others of us will do it through careful listening, as many will do at the Musical Masterworks performance this afternoon. Some will do it in their woodshop or tool shed while others might do it in gardens, or through meditation, or walking, or kayaking, or another form of movement. There are many ways to access the holy highway, but all of them require careful cultivation and practice, across a long period of time. I suspect that cultivating such places within ourselves is necessary for the preservation not only of religion itself, but for the preservation of democracy, and maybe of our very personhood.

There's another way that we can and do cultivate that source of our personhood. I think that gathering in the Meetinghouse is a way of activating and then preserving such a space within ourselves. The timing and the pace of a service of worship is different from the pace of our other activities, and it can feel jarring, maybe even -perish the thought - boring to slip into that different modality. That's because, at its best, we're accessing a different dimension of ourselves, the place from which prayers can spring, the place from which desire can grow, the place from which imagination and creativity are formed. It's the place from which hope and expectation begin to take root and grow. And isn't that, finally, what Advent is meant to do - to cultivate within ourselves, year after year, a great open domain within ourselves where something beyond the shallows might emerge? Is that not what it means to prepare the way of the Lord?

I'll close with a story, followed by a plea. It's a difficult story in some ways, but it's true all the same. One of the most depressing nights I experienced as a hospital chaplain was when I received a call in the middle of the night informing me that a patient had died. That wasn't the hard part - that happened all the time. I was given the task of calling her family, which I did. For the next hour, I waited for them to arrive in the patient's room. The TV was on, and a long infomercial was playing that must have lasted for the better part of that hour. I had no way of

controlling the TV, and so I simply watched. It was selling a device that cleaned vinyl siding, and it showed an endless succession of silly reenactments depicting before and after scenarios, with and without the device. Now, bear in mind, this was a setting, an ICU unit of a hospital, in which the greatest of all existential sagas was bearing out in room after room, where the great struggle between life and death was being waged over and over again, in which, on a daily basis, people were actively transitioning from life to death. I found it horrifying that the spiritual accompaniment by which many people were forced to make that great transition was fare like an infomercial on late night TV. It struck me then, as it does now, as a potent symbol of the terrifying emptiness at the core of so much of our collective lives. Surely that's not the way to slip from one plane of existence to another, from one highway to the next.

Which leads to my plea. That moment in the hospital discloses a deficiency of soul and spirit that can and does happen long before we ever reach the end. I have thoughts about what that might mean for care at the end of our lives, but my hope is that we might address that terrible emptiness long before we arrive in a hospital. My hope is that, among the other many things given to us to do across a lifetime, we will have created, preserved, and enlarged those open spaces within ourselves - souls - where our very being takes shape and soars. My hope is that we won't have waited until it's too late, until nothing but an infomercial accompanies us into the great mystery beyond. My hope is that we will have been about the business all along of preparing the way of the Lord within ourselves, and of hearing a still small voice whispering back to us.

Oh, and when it's my time to go, please, please, turn off the TV. Read to me. Read to me from *Ulysses*.