

The Life Journey, Cornell College Baccalaureate 2014¹
by The Rev. Dr. Catherine Quehl-Engel, College Chaplain

A few months ago I walked past a student's graffitied car. The message left on the window read, "Kyle, *The Future's So Bright, I Gotta Wear Shades!* Love Mom."

Seniors, what I'm going to say about sojourning like Abram out past the familiar is for *your* life narrative, though maybe there's something in it for your folks and Cornell staff and faculty too. Despite any and all fears or frustrations you may occasionally have with your life itinerary—my hope is that you remember Kyle's mom is right. She's right even if your path forward is uncertain, and things at present aren't matching the expectations you or others have for your life. If after today you occasionally feel lost, adrift, or your plans fall apart, I hope you remember what Mo said about Prophet Mohammed's advice: How when you *travel stage to stage* on your journey, remember to witness *the rosy glow of the sunset* and how *the moon grows into fullness*. Remember how *after difficulty comes the easing*; and *each day is a resurrection*.ⁱ

But I'm jumping ahead of myself. I'd like to talk with you about the life journey by beginning where many journeys do. In an airport.

A couple times a year, beginning at ages 9 and 10, my mom would put my brother Scott and I on a Van Gelder bus in Wisconsin and we'd arrive several hours later at Chicago's O'Hare Airport. We'd navigate our way from the basement level to the ticket counter above, through security, to our gate, then fly to Washington D.C. on our way to see Dad. But this is *not* why I get weepy in airports.

Over this year's spring break I spent 14 hours trying to fly in and out of O'Hare in the midst of a snow storm on my way to Washington. As I waited out the storm, I wondered if I'd

¹ Sacred texts for this message are located in end notes.

ever make it to the oral defense my doctoral dissertation the next morning. But fear and frustration are not why I get weepy in airports.

When I finally arrived at the hotel late that night and began to unpack, I realized I had inadvertently packed, and been lugging around, an odd assortment of things for my less than 24 hour stay: This crazy rushed packing job included, not 1, but 2 heavy copies of my dissertation, three socks, and four pairs of underwear. I could tell you that the point of this story is to pack spare underwear for your next interview. While this may be a good idea, it's not the point. Nor is lugging around a heavy book bag of careless packing the reason I get weepy in airports.

I get weepy in airports because airports are one of the most mystically moving of places I've known. Thousands of strangers intersect in this liminal or threshold in-between place of transition, waiting, and entrusting. Just like you now. Awareness of our oneness heightens as I watch fellow travelers—those who look all put together, and those utterly undone—and I realize how much I love these people.

So I guess I get weepy in airports because of agapeⁱⁱ—that awareness of oneness and sacred love for another, and desire for each other's highest good. You glimpse each traveler as an Abram or Sarai heading out on a journey beyond the familiar. Just like yourself. Each of them sojourning with carefully planned itineraries, hopes, and expected destinations. All of us coming from and going to different places on separate life journeys. But on some level, the journey is the same. Here at the travelers' crossroad the illusion of our separateness “thins.”

Then there is the realization of how, like the tragic disappearance of a Malaysian plane filled with passengers, our individual plans are, when all is said and done, only plans. We need to make them, of course. Yet every now and then we are reminded how the life journey involves self-determination and hard work yet also the pliability of self-surrender.

We each face seasons of our lives when we optimistically set out in fresh directions with success in reaching our intended destinations, and seasons when we have to backtrack, or wander lost. Sometimes everything falls apart no matter how hard you try to fix it. Yet how often have you already known your plans, families, friendships, or wellbeing to come undone, only to eventually come out the other end and think to yourself, “I wish this on no one, but having made it out the other side, thank you”? How, as the expression goes, when going through hell, you just keep going, then when you come out the other side the world seems more beautiful. The colors more vivid. Your solidarity with others larger. And sometimes—sometimes your true life purpose, rather than the one you first imagined, awaits you. Kind of like it did for St. Francis.

You may be surprised to learn that the beloved 12th c. figure known as Francis of Assisi was, in his youth, anything but a saint. While kind, he was a vain, spoiled, carefree, party boy. He was also the son of a wealthy, social status climbing father. In other words, young Francis was utterly unlike the man Christians and non-Christians alike associate with teachings on solidarity with the outcast and poor, revering God in all beings, and embracing your own weakness or spiritual poverty as the path to empowerment and healing peace. Things changed after young Francis headed off to war with dreams of military glory. Instead of coming home a hero, he witnessed and couldn't stop the slaughter of his boyhood friends on the battlefield, and was himself taken as a wounded prisoner of war. He contracted a disease while locked in a dungeon of filth, cold, and darkness for over a year. When Francis returned home his struggle with both physical and mental illness remained. His previous ambitions, along with those his father had for Francis' life, no longer worked.

When he couldn't snap out of his depression, Francis' dad, the mercantile and nobility classes of his day, and Francis himself judged him to be a useless failure. His dad even locked

Francis in the cellar for weeks until Francis' mother helped him flee. Given that abuse we can only imagine what happened to his mother. Historic documents don't say, though they do tell us how Francis was disowned, and becomes a social outcast. Just like the village lepers.

But transformative healing happened for Francis through two encounters. One was before an image of Divine co-suffering with which he experienced oneness and companioning love. The other transformative moment involved his recognizing himself and God in a leper asking for aid. With nothing else to offer, Francis offers an embrace, and in that moment, Francis not only experiences love and oneness with those broken and marginalized in society. He allows unconditional sacred love to embrace all that was broken and outcast inside him.ⁱⁱⁱ

This way of healing peace is advocated not only by Franciscan spirituality. Responding with compassion rather than aggression toward all that is broken in our lives is the transformative healing path also found in traditions like Buddhism and twelve step programs like AA. Francis' love and sense of solidarity with others spilled over to all living beings. He talked to all "creatures, no matter how small, by the name of brother or sister", knowing they share joys, struggles, and shared being reflections of the same life source as himself.^{iv} That's why you see that popular image of him in gardens, feeding and conferencing with birds. Ultimately, what began as a horrible stage in Francis' life journey sprang a major spiritual reform movement that cared for the poor, and challenged a decadent, self-focused church and culture of his day. It continues to shape social justice and environmental movements today including the reform efforts like those of Pope Francis, Nuns On the Bus, and others.

Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr says something about this for our life journeys. Something saints and mystics like Francis from diverse spiritual backgrounds have often said: *some event, struggle, relationship, or suffering in our lives has to bring us to the edge of our own*

resources... something that you by yourself cannot understand, fix, control, change, or even begin to deal with. It is the raw experience of 'I cannot do this' [And] all you can do at this point is wait and ask and trust. This, says Rohr, is where you learn real patience, compassion, and forgiveness. “I don’t know how else you learn to forgive other people,” says Rohr, “until you see seventy-times seven your own brokenness, your own incapacity...and inability to do anything about it except throw yourself into the arms of mercy and love (Luke 7:47).” This, says Rohr, “is the darkness of faith, and now you can trust that this darkness is a much better teacher than supposed certainty or rightness.”

This is also the classic hero journey tale involving waiting and wading through fear and the unknown, groping your way in the dark in utter trust. That, I believe, rather than dogma, is the meaning of faith.

And the Lord said to Abram “Go from your country and your kindred, and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” In other words, leave behind your false security in the knowns. Note how there is a word play in the text, for the city where Abram is receiving this sacred call is “Haran” which in Hebrew means “crossroads.” He was at a crossroads in his life. Just like you. And crossroads, in this and other ancient cultures, were understood to be places where danger lurks. Ancient peoples put up shrines, prayed for safety, and changed directions at crossroads in order to trick the spirits of the past which tried to haunt them. It was at such a crossroad moment that Abram dared to turn in a new direction, entrusting as he walked on.

Note how the Genesis story doesn’t say why God picked Abram. But what we do know from other biblical stories, from our own lives, and lives of those we love, is that the method of God or the universe doesn’t involve people getting picked as blessings based on whether they had perfect pasts, grades, or credentials of belief.

By the way, the Good Book says Abram was seventy-five when he departed from Haran for his life purpose (Genesis 12:4). That's good news for those of us in the second half of life. It's also good ammunition for you graduates when Uncle Fred asks when you'll finally know what you'll do with your life. On a related note: When my husband was asked his senior year at Cornell what he'd do with a Cornell liberal arts degree, he replied "Anything I want." That's the beauty of the liberal arts, and why people like my husband could have seemingly impractical majors like Religion and English, then end up senior vice presidents of national companies in completely different fields.

There's an important detail about Abram being blessed that you ought to know. In the fine print later in the story he and his life mate still faced that whole famine in Egypt thing (Gen 12:10), not to mention family spats (12:8; 21:8-21), and backtracking when trying to journey toward their destination (12:9,13:3). But that's good news, people: If life foibles were good enough for the patriarch of the three major religions of the world, then they're good enough for you and me (13:3). Remember, you are a blessing. So eat your greens and keep going.

Also note how God tells Abram he is going to be a blessing for those who come after him. In other words, his life journey wasn't about him. His life—and your life—are for a larger purpose. This doesn't mean you need to be another Saint Francis. As a classic rabbinical tale about Rabbi Zarusa puts it, "When I get to heaven God won't ask me why I wasn't more like Moses. God will ask, "Zarusa, why weren't you more like Zarusa?" It means: be the blessing that is *you* based on all you've experienced on the journey. The blessing doesn't have to come with headlines and heroics. It can be as quiet as Sr. Wendy when you can't sleep. Sr. Wendy is that elderly British nun, art critic, and former student of J.R.R. Tolkien on Public Television whom Prof. Jim Van Valen describes as having a bit of rascal in her. She prays in the middle of

the night for people who are alone, afraid, can't sleep, and need to know someone is holding them in prayer. Especially if they are unable to pray themselves. If ever you feel blue, and far from a blessing, she'll tell you "I don't believe in this happiness/unhappiness business. But God uses everything in us, including our suffering. You take what comes and give it to God; your hurts, you give those too. God will use them for the healing of the world."

Again, your blessing doesn't need to be heroic or make headlines. You can engaged in Tikkun Olam—the healing of the world, through ordinary actions by simply changing your awareness, tapping into Life Source energies of love, as you do them. You can walk down the street, pour a cup of coffee, or greet others in airports with a loving gaze and be pouring divine life and healing peace into the world.^v

Still, let me be clear that I am not saying heroic effort will never be asked of you. It's like what Paulo Coelho's [Coe-a-u's] guide tells him in a story called *The Pilgrimage*. Coelho [Coe-a-u], who also wrote *The Alchemist*, is traveling along the Camino de Santiago which is a large network of ancient pilgrim routes stretching across Europe which end at the tomb of St. James in Spain. Each year millions of people spend weeks walking the Camino, some doing so to commune with the Holy; some to party or lose weight; some to find healing and direction for their lives. If you've seen Martin Sheen's powerful film *The Way* in which a father finishes his son's journey along the Camino for him by scattering his ashes along the route, then you also know the setting for Coelho's *Pilgrimage*.

In Coelho's story a guide named Petrus says three things relevant for our life pilgrimages. First, he names how we often make the mistake of thinking the journey is about achieving a reward. "If someone wants to fight the good fight" says Petrus, then choose instead to "view the world as if it were a marvelous treasure waiting to be discovered (93)."

Second, Petrus warns how there are people who “don’t ask much of life because they are afraid of being defeated”:

When we’re young and our dreams first explode inside us with all their force, we are very courageous [says Petrus], but we haven’t yet learned how to fight the good fight. [As we age we learn what it takes to do this,] but by then we no longer have the courage...So we turn against ourselves and do battle within. We become our worst enemy. We say that our dreams were childish, or too difficult to realize. The first symptom of ...killing our dreams is the lack of time. The truth is, they are afraid. The busiest people I have known in my life always have time enough to do everything.

I share this with you so you are careful when that feeling rises inside you causing you to question whether you have what it takes to continue the path you set out on. In those crossroad moments, look for signs as to whether your thoughts of possibly rerouting your life itinerary come from the still, small voice of God and the universe speaking inside you, or whether that feeling is haunting discouragement, laziness, or fear itself.

Finally the guide speaks of agape—the Divine force of unconditional love—being manifest freely inside everyone and everything. As Coelho [Coe-a-u] grows on the journey, he learns courage and perseverance. He learns how his very being, like the universe, manifests the Divine. He learns to speak the soul’s code like Mohammed and Francis did with brother sun and sister moon. All of this becomes the reward. A tidal wave of joy fills him. I wonder if that awareness of oneness and agape made him weepy.

A thick blanket of fog settled in, making it hard for Coelho to see his way forward. But that sensation of joy, love, and wonder stirred inside him. Yes, the path ahead was uncertain, and occasionally he got lost and tired. But he journeyed on for the future and his very substance, like yours, were full of Light.

Class of 2014, so lovely and bright, may do the same.

ⁱ The full reading in the service was taken from the Qur'an 23:47, 84:16-19, 94:5-8

ⁱⁱ Anglican theologian O.C. Quick describes agape as "the love of one who loves men purely for their own sake, and not because of any need or desire of his own, [but] purely desires their good [and has in mind] some true image of the love of the Father and Creator of mankind." Quick, O.C. *Doctrines of the Creed*, Scribners, 1938 p. 55.

ⁱⁱⁱ Francis, "The Testament," in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*. Regis J. Armstrong, J.A. Wayne Hellmann, and William J. Short, eds. New York: New City Press, 124.

^{iv} Bonaventure 8.6.

^v See Thomas Keating, *The Mystery of Christ: The Liturgy As Spiritual Experience* (Amity, NY: Amity House, 1987), 25.

SACRED READINGS FOR TODAY'S MESSAGE:

ROMANS 12:2-3, 6-18, 21

Hear what the Spirit is saying:

Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

TAO TE CHING 44

Hear these words from The Tao Te Ching:

Fame or integrity: which is more important?

Money or happiness: which is more valuable?

Success or failure: which is more destructive?

If you look to others for fulfillment,
you will never truly be fulfilled.

If your happiness depends on money,
you will never be happy with yourself.

Be content with what you have;
rejoice in the way things are.

When you realize there is nothing lacking,
the whole world belongs to you.

QUR'AN 23:47, 84:16-19, 94:5-8

In the name of God, Most Gracious and Merciful:

Allah it is Who makes the night as a robe for you and sleep a repose, and makes every day a resurrection.

So I call witness to the rosy glow of sunset, the night and its progression, and the moon as it grows into fullness: surely you shall travel from stage to stage.

After the difficulty is the easing. After the difficulty is the easing. So when you are finished, strive again and in your Lord aspire.

GENESIS 12:1-2

Hear what the Spirit is saying...

Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.'