



FINDING HOME IN THE FACE OF A STRANGER

BY JOEL CARILLET

The Parable of the Good Samaritan may seem an unusual point from which to begin a search for a deeper understanding of *home*. The story of a desperate man and the one who helped him doesn't once mention the word itself. But it does speak about our neighbors. And because how we understand our neighbors shapes how we understand our home, the parable may be just the place to begin.

The story implies that we cannot know eternal life — our ultimate home — until we can see our neighbor even in the face of a stranger. While the conventional understanding of home envisions a place to which we withdraw in a narrow circle of family and friends, the parable invites us to grapple with a larger vision.

Home, it suggests, is the place where we demonstrate love even to

those we have not met before. And this may lead us to stop in the most inconvenient of places. It might be on the edge of a dusty highway in the dangerous hills between Jerusalem and Jericho, but it could also be at a table with a Thai prostitute living with HIV, in the streets of a Palestinian refugee camp with one contemplating horrific violence, or on the shoulder of a New York interstate with a person struggling over a flat tire. The point is that home is not found behind a closed door. Instead, it is found to the degree that we go *out* from closed doors and encounter our neighbors.

'We will be your family'

In 2003, with a backpack strapped to my shoulders, I embarked on a 14-month overland journey across Asia. Other than some books and clothes, I carried little with me. One thing I did not leave behind was the lesson of Jesus' parable. With each month on the road, I learned new things about home — that it is too large to be constrained by borders, too spiritual to be only physical, too untamed for one to claim to possess like a piece of property. And in looking into the faces of strangers — in experiencing their looks into mine — I also grew convinced that home, like grace, is a gift.

The people who taught me these things came from varying backgrounds. Some were poor children, one was an exile, and one was even a president's mom. But all were strangers, just as I was a stranger to them.

Venturing into a poor district of Kathmandu, I met two sisters — Meena, age 13, and Pushpa, age 11.

These delightful children invited me to their house for tea, where I met their family. After a couple hours I needed to return to my hotel, but as I stood to leave they begged me to return the following day. I promised I would. Hours later, however, I was robbed, and my losses — four months worth of traveling money, a camera, and a notebook filled with notes and interviews — left me in despair.

The next day I was in no mood to socialize, but I wanted to keep my promise. Drained and depressed, I must have looked awful. I was certainly wounded. As I approached their home, the score of chattering women and children out front grew hushed. A moment later, Pushpa stepped out from the group and gingerly took my hand.

A Hindu family had taken me in not because I was someone they knew but because I was someone in need.

When I told the children about the theft, they were stunned. Their faces, so expressive and pure, began to visibly absorb the impact of evil. There was such silence at the home now — we were sitting on a concrete well outside the front door — that one would have thought we were life-long friends rather than recent acquaintances. Quickly shaking loose the shock, Pushpa slid in next to me and wrapped her lanky, girlish arms around mine. She caressed my hand

and rested her head just above the curve of my elbow, saying, "I'm so sorry, Joel." While I would never see my bag again, in Pushpa's touch I experienced the miracle of compassion, and it began to transform me.

Meena, meanwhile, had translated my story to her mother, and I watched the face of this older woman also take on my pain. The mother spoke to Meena, who then relayed her words to me: "My mother loves you very much. You are like a son to her." The family insisted I stay the night with them since, as they put it, when one has troubles one needs family. "We will be your family," Meena said, smiling.

Later that night, having been well fed and given the only private room in the two-room house, I realized I was like the wounded man in Jesus' parable. A Hindu family had taken me in and was caring for me not because I was someone they knew but because I was someone in need.

More than words

Weeks later I visited the Tibetan government in exile's administrative center in Dharamsala, India, where I encountered another dimension of home. As a community of refugees, one might think Dharamsala holds a lot of sadness and pain. Not every place, for instance, has a health department in which one room is dedicated to the "Torture Survivors Program." But negative adjectives don't accurately describe the place. Is that because the Dalai Lama, rather than teaching anger, says things like,



“Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them humanity cannot survive.” Is it because the Dalai Lama, rather than walking around serious-faced, often breaks into laughter that nearly swallows his eyes?

I had been to the White House and Downing Street, but neither of these compared to the residence of the Dalai Lama. Just as Tibetans circle temples, they use a trail about a mile long to walk around the residence. The path was never crowded while I was there, and the people who walked it, many well advanced in years, were prayerful and humble. And they held no illusions of power because they had none.

Along the trail, an old Tibetan woman paused in her circuit and came up behind me as I was videotaping a clan of monkeys. She rested her right hand on my shoulder and leaned her body into mine. And then she quietly watched the screen, as though we were old chums who needed to exchange no words because words are for strangers. And there was something of the Kingdom of Heaven in our physical connection, in her eyes and her smile. It was in her curiosity, boldness, and gentleness. Because of the language barrier we never uttered a sound, yet I had spoken to some for hours and not been as uplifted and connected as I was during this brief encounter. In a minute she left, smiling, all 60-some years of her, and I returned to watching the monkeys in the tree, nearly bursting with joy. The sun was shining brightly, as were the people around me.

While I was in Dharamsala, a spent a lot of time with a young woman named Tsering, who had fled Tibet at the age of 14. On the eve of my departure I went to say goodbye. Not wanting to trespass on any cultural boundaries, yet embarrassed by the

inadequacy of the gesture even before it began, I somewhat ungracefully extended my arm for a handshake. Tsering would have none of it. She ignored the hand and stepped forward to embrace me. Maybe she was simply remembering the words of the Dalai Lama. Or maybe she embraced me because that is part of how we may discover home — not the one we have left behind, but the one that we all, at our best, are yearning to find. She was an exile, directing me home through a loving embrace, sending me on my way with laughter, and perceptively junking the formal handshake as an inefficient mode through which to part.

I thought later of the Greek slave in C.S. Lewis' *Till We Have Faces*, who was taken from his homeland. At one point in the book, the slave grew melancholy as he reflected on the home (and freedom) that he missed so much and knew he would never see again. In an effort to boost his own spirit, he reached into his philosophical bent and said, “No man can be an exile if he remembers that all the world is one city.” Through Tsering's embrace, I understood those words. I too was an exile, far from home and striving for it.

Showering blessings

Some months later, I found myself at the National Library of Pakistan in Islamabad. Browsing the magazine shelves, I discovered “Pakistan's first and only parenting magazine” — *Motherhood*. When I saw that the cover story was an interview with Begum Zarrin Musharrafuddin, the mother of President Pervez Musharraf, I snatched the magazine and retreated to a chair. Reading the interview, I was struck by this mother's love for her son, and I smiled when I read of her morning ritual, which the

article said continues to this day: Each morning after eating breakfast with her son, as Musharraf departs for work, she showers him with blessings.

What a picture — a mother audibly blessing her child as he leaves for work. In a fit of imagination, I pictured 6.5 billion people, all wanting to love their neighbors, blessing one another. And from my library chair I silently joined Zarrin in blessing her son. Then I said a prayer for Meena and Pushpa, and one for Tsering, and then for a score of other strangers-cum-friends. Travel, like the parable of the Good Samaritan, offers us a way to see the world as a whole, and in seeing the whole we will want to bless the whole rather than just a part of the whole.

When I returned from Asia at the end of 2004, I pulled out some old books and came across this stanza in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the
first time.

At the end of my own exploration, I think this is what I knew for the first time — that home is love. Love motivates us to move out; love moves us to compassionately observe our surroundings and to relate to the poor; love enables us to lose ourselves in something greater than ourselves — because love gives us eyes to see that we are but part of a larger whole. ❏

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