

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Journeys, spiritual and physical

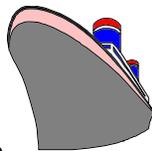


I've lived in very few places, but all my life I've traveled a lot. Some of my earliest memories are of my father poring over maps, planning our next summer vacation trip. He thought about it all winter, and by spring he was making motel reservations. Early on the first day of his annual vacation time, he and my mother and I set out from our home in Houston. Every day we covered as much territory as we could, and we didn't come home until the very last day.



Now my husband is the one who pores over travel magazines and tour catalogs, thinking about where we might go next, and this year he and I are traveling even more than before. My travels remind me of how physical journeys are like the journey of life and like the journey we make toward God.

■ The destination isn't everything



"Getting there is half the fun," the Cunard steamship line advertised years ago when many tourists crossed the oceans by ship. My five days on Cunard's Queen Mary on my first trip to Europe *were* fun, because I'd never done any such thing before. Usually, however, I dislike the time that has to be spent getting to a trip's main destination. On family car trips while I was growing up, I loved the national parks and other scenic places we went to, but I usually read while we crossed west Texas and the desert areas of western states. On car trips now, I often read or work crossword puzzles while we cover familiar territory.

Sometimes that's unwise. On spiritual journeys and life journeys, what we see along the way can be more important than the place we're think we're trying to reach. And feeling that we've arrived can be deadly.

Connections and disconnections



When I travel a lot I get concerned about how my travel disconnects me from home activities I consider important. I have a hard time keeping *Connections* going, and I miss some church gatherings that would keep me informed about what's happening in the church. Also, when I'm gone so much I can't commit to teaching, holding office, or taking part in local-church ministries that must be done regularly.

What is God's will in all this, I wonder? Should I travel less? I'm not sure. Travel brings useful new connections. It reminds me how many people there are whose experiences and beliefs differ from those of my family and friends. It lets me hear what's happening and how members are reacting in churches other than mine. Travel also lets me testify to the value of the church and the Christian faith, to the many fellow travelers whose view of churches is negative.

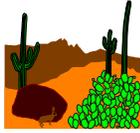
Spiritual journeys can have similar results. Staying involved in church bureaucracy and activities gets hard when the spiritual journey reveals some of them as pointless or as a hindrance to the church's God-given purpose. Spiritual journeys can also cause disconnection from the church members who don't seem interested in expanding their view of God or the church.

Spiritual journeys, however, can lead us closer not only to God but also to kindred spirits we haven't been aware of before in the church. Here's how Quaker author Thomas R. Kelly puts it. "Some men and women whom we have never known before, or whom we have noticed only as a dim background for our more special friendships, suddenly loom large, step forward in our attention as men and women whom we now know to the depths. Our earlier conversations with these persons may have been few and brief, but now we know them, as it were, from within. For we discern that their lives are already down within that Center which has found us . . ." (*A Testament of Devotion*, Harper & Row 1941)

Finding that kind of new connections can make up for a lot of disconnection.



It can lead to smug self-satisfaction and narrowness. Those prevent the continuing growth that's essential for becoming what God calls us to be. When we assume that we don't need to reconsider scriptures we've read often or ideas we've rejected, we likely to miss the growth God wants us to experience.



■ **Wilderness times can be valuable**

In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

—Isaiah 40:3

Times when we seem to be between destinations or wandering aimlessly—when we feel as if we're in a wilderness—can be useful despite being boring or even painful. Since the fourth century

when monks went to the Syrian desert, many Christians have deliberately gone to the wilderness to find God. Some go on retreats to escape the daily routine in order to focus on the spiritual journey. We sometimes end up in a wilderness without choosing to, when illness or something else unexpected removes us from our usual patterns. The lack of other activity during such times can make us more likely to notice God. It can let us prepare for whatever God may call us to do next.



■ **Traveling light brings freedom**

Every time I get home from a trip I vow to take fewer clothes next time, but I keep taking more than I need. I'm always trying to be prepared for whatever weather and activities might come along. I'm likely to have my folding umbrella in my purse even when I go on short errands at home on a sunny day. I know that being prepared for everything is impossible, but it's still hard for me to resist trying. By contrast, a friend of mine has recently made several trips to Europe and Asia taking only a backpack. I can't imagine myself doing that, but I



can see how useful it is. The more baggage we have, the harder it is for us to move around, and the more advance notice we need for changing plans.

On our life journeys and spiritual journeys, the baggage of past experience can be a hindrance. Carrying grudges and prejudices can keep us from connecting with people God sends across our path. Thinking there's only one right way to worship can

keep us from experiencing God in new ways. Being weighted down with anger about past mistreatment can keep us from appreciating unexpected kindness.

On trips I still take some clothes I don't need, but I've cut down. I've realized that function usually matters more than appearance. Wearing the shoes that look best for an opera or an upscale restaurant can keep me from being able to walk to an interesting sight that's in the same vicinity, so I no longer give those shoes space in my luggage. On the spiritual journey, following traditions in order to look good to other people can keep us from going where God wants us to go.



■ **The map isn't the journey**



Looking at maps and travel magazines at home can be interesting and helpful, but it's not like traveling. Using maps and guidebooks during a trip is helpful only up to a point. On car trips I've missed interesting sights because my head was buried in a map or guidebook, preparing for something farther down the road. And carrying too many maps and books sometimes keeps me from walking as far as I could otherwise walk.

The spiritual journey has these dangers, too. Reading the Bible to find out about being a Christian is useful for a start, but we can't fully know what being a Christian means until we put it into practice. Sometimes instead of reading more in the Bible we need to get busy doing what we've read about.

■ **Tourists miss a lot**



Many of us can do our physical traveling only as tourists, but that kind of travel has drawbacks. It does for the spiritual journey, too.

Merely dabbling in the Christian life is like being a tourist. We see only what's best known and most obvious. We measure unfamiliar viewpoints and religious beliefs only by our own. This makes us seem rude and arrogant to others, and it may keep us from considering new viewpoints that God wants us to consider. It may even keep us from seeing the sinfulness of some of our beliefs and customs.

■ **Journeys bring surprises**

I still remember the shock of seeing a department store in downtown Toronto named Hudson's Bay Co.

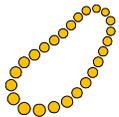


In school I'd learned about its sending out explorers when it was a fur-trading company, but I had no idea it still existed. In Rome I was startled to see on manhole covers "SPQR," the initials of "the Senate and the Roman People" in Latin. I remembered seeing that monogram in my 9th-grade Latin textbook, but I hadn't dreamed it was still in use. Seeing the snow-covered Alps for the first time was unforgettable. Experiences like these make travel exciting for me, just as surprising discoveries can make the spiritual journey exciting.



■ **Some mementos help, some don't**

Even when I've enjoyed new things and beautiful sights on my travels, I sometimes lose track of what I've seen and where I've seen it. I remember my father rolling his eyes and shaking his head in frustration when I said I couldn't remember whether the Grand Canyon was in Arizona or New Mexico.



Mementos can help. When I wear the amber necklace I bought last year in Visby, a tiny Swedish island that I'd never even heard of before I went there, I mentally revisit it. When I re-encounter scriptures that have been important in my spiritual journey—Romans 12:2 or Luke 13:12, perhaps—they revive my willingness to keep doing what I think God is calling me to do.

I often save things I don't need to save, however. A brochure listing Santa Fe art exhibits was useful when I was there, but at home now it's mere clutter. We can clutter up our spiritual lives with no-longer-useful mementos, too. Scriptures that forbid women from wearing braided hair, gold, and pearls (1 Tim. 2:9, 1 Pet. 3:3), for example, may have shown God's will to



the people of another time and culture, but they probably don't portray God's will for us.

■ **Getting the picture but missing the view**

The main travel mementos that I save are photographs. When I get home from a trip I love looking at them. They remind me of beautiful scenes, traveling companions, and what was happening in my life when I made the trip.



Like saving other mementos, however, taking pictures can be overdone. I've missed seeing important sights because I was taking pictures of something else nearby. I've even gotten home and seen something in a picture I took, that I didn't notice when I was there.

Pictures can't replace making the trip. I have boxes full of pictures my parents took on their many trips, and I hate to throw them away, but saving pictures of trips I didn't make is probably pointless. And the gifts and postcards I send to friends from my travels can't convey what the trips mean to me. Similarly, descriptions of others' spiritual journeys can be helpful, but they're not like making the journey.

■ **Meeting other travelers can help**

An enjoyable part of travel is meeting other travelers and hearing about where they've been. It can give valuable information about where we're currently headed, and it can make us aware of interesting trips we haven't previously considered. Finding someone from home in a far-away place is fun, too, whether it's planned or unexpected. Sometimes being with a familiar person in an unfamiliar place reveals interests that I hadn't known we shared. That can happen on the spiritual journey, too, and when it does it's exciting.



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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Some readers make voluntary financial contributions, but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

■ **New sights bring new awareness**

Travel teaches us a lot about other cultures and earlier civilizations. It can make us reevaluate our own in needed ways. I've seen how irreplaceable art works have been damaged or even destroyed by people who disagreed with their religious intent and couldn't separate it from their artistic value. Was that wise? I doubt it, but I'm not sure. I've seen priceless paintings and once-magnificent pipe organs crumbling for lack of maintenance. Do other uses of funds deserve higher priority? I'm not sure, but I'm sure that having such questions brought to mind is important.



What kind of journey are you making?

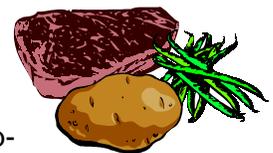
Whether it's armchair travel or circling the globe, and whether it's a physical journey, a spiritual one, or the journey through life, getting away from what's familiar can enliven life and increase awareness of God. Whether that result happens, however, depends on how we travel. Our churches include spiritual stay-at-homes and spiritual travelers. They include people who want to see more, those who are afraid to see more, and those who aren't willing to risk the temporary discomfort that almost any journey includes. Which kind of spiritual traveler are you?

Barbara



Are you missing God-given opportunities?

I'm amazed by the travelers who make expensive trips to faraway places but don't get out and see what's most distinctive about those places. On a Caribbean trip a few years ago my husband and I rushed out every time the ship docked at a new port, to see as much as we could in the available time. But two couples we met had brought folding chairs and a portable TV from home, and at every port they merely took them to the nearest beach and sat there until time to get back on the ship. We were seeing many kinds of locally grown fruits in open-air markets at every stop, but the only fruits available on our ship were apples, bananas, and oranges. At local restaurants we had marvelous dishes featuring local fish and vegetables, but ship-board meals offered only the most familiar U.S. foods like steak, potatoes, and green beans.



On our spiritual journeys, too, we sometimes fail to take advantage of opportunities to learn and grow. Christian tradition and even our own congregations include worship styles, experiences, and people that could increase our awareness of God if we sampled what they had to offer us.