

# Homecomings and Leavings

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**F**OR SOME YEARS NOW, I have on a regular basis experienced what I have come to call ‘homecoming dreams.’ In each, I am out in the world somewhere, doing something, and trying to get home, but in the dream I find it frustratingly impossible to get there. I am kept from home sometimes by circumstances out in the world and sometimes by my own bodily failures. In the dream I cannot find my way home, or for some reason, I am incapable of moving towards it; I become agitated and alarmed, and despite all of my efforts and longing, I realize no progress and remain, alas, frustratingly in a form of exile. Though I long to arrive home, I have no facility or power to get there. When I awake, my heart beats furiously, and I am out of breath. I am distressed and yet relieved to discover myself in my own bed. And though I awaken from the dream always at ‘home,’ I am troubled by the recurrence of this dream in which I cannot get home even when I am already there.

In my life, I have never been homeless. Awake now, in moments of reflective tranquility, I wonder where and what is the home to which in the dream I have such desire yet no capacity to return. This home is not distinguished by specific place or location—it is I think in the dreams an amalgam of the several places I have called home—nor is this home identified consistently with any precise constellation of people from a specific period in my life. I might even now ask *when* is the home from which I am kept away. And I wonder whether *this home* to which I want to return in the dream is actually *that home* toward which I head only never to arrive while I am yet awake.

Years ago, I had written an essay in which I argued that education might be identified with leaving home. “Education,” I wrote then, “has nothing to do with marked paths and coming home. Rather, education has more to do with meandering: with getting lost.” (Block, 1998, p. 326) Schools, and curriculum specifically, I argued then, should help people journey risk free to a condition of lostness and that from that position they might by their efforts find themselves again. Like the crew of the starship Enterprise, students must go to places no woman nor man has gone before: to discover for themselves worlds that they previously did not know existed. Education must lead students out and away from home, I argued then, and not draw them back to that familiar address. In my writing, I argued that home represented the controlling center from which emanated prescribed paths promising endless return and, by so doing, constrained explora-

tion. To leave home behind, I said, made possible the discovery of home everywhere. Thoreau (1980) wrote:

If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again—if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man, then you are ready for a walk. (p. 83)

Curriculum is the exercise of that walk, and engaging in it requires that one first leave home.

This leave-taking need not necessarily be a physical absence—it *is* simply a walk Thoreau advocates—but an emotional leave-taking—one must be wholly unencumbered and be prepared to leave *everything* behind. Vardenoe and Gopnik (1990) say that the *affichiste* artists of the early 1940s and 1950s—those who made collages from the scraps and pieces of torn posters—“bring us glad tidings by taking us on extraordinary journeys to familiar places, but only on its own eccentric terms. The deal is that you have to go without a map, and you can only get there on foot” (p. 412). I argued that curriculum ought to offer the same active experience to students as these canvases offered to energetic viewers. Perhaps my dream where I am drawn back home suggests that I am not prepared to engage in that walk. In my dream, I always know where I am. I am not lost in physical space but lost, perhaps, in psychic space, disoriented and disturbingly estranged. In the dream that place to which I want to return is designated ‘home,’ though I do not think that it is my home that I seek. Or perhaps in the dream the home from which I am separated is the home I have not yet known.

Though home might be traditionally understood as a place of ultimate return (“Home is where when you go there, they have to take you in,” Frost (1967) writes in “Death of the Hired Man”). Home need not be identified with that return but, rather, can now be appreciated as a setting forth. If in my dream I seek to return home, then perhaps in my waking life I experience some absence, some lack, which achieving ‘home’ will fill, however it will be that I define ‘home.’ My dreams depict my yearning. Without that longing, there would be in life no impetus to move and that would be equivalent to death. Desire sends me *out* from a settled place of home rather than draws me back to it. After Lacan, I can call that lack Desire, which because it may be only known by what it is not, may be constitutive of my unconsciousness. That is, my desire is always displaced into an object that desire then makes visible, but Desire itself remains unseen and even unknown. However, when I acquire the object, my desire is not satiated nor gone. Desire is never known, but always pursued. Slavoj Žižek (1991) writes that

The paradox of desire is that it posits retroactively its own cause, i.e., the object *a* is an object that can be perceived only by a gaze “distorted” by desire, an object that *does not* exist for an “objective” gaze. (p. 12)

The desire only comes to exist when it is discovered in an object. It is not chocolate which activates my desire, but my desire that defines chocolate as the desired object. My desire in the dream is not for home, but in the dream home is the object of my desire.

Desire may be constituted by the inevitable and irrevocable loss of the attachment to the mother’s breast. When there is no absence between the child and the breast, there is no Desire. But when the breast is no longer available, then what remains as a consequence of the separation is Desire and that Desire seeks an impossible union and unattainable happiness. Desire arises out of that loss and that absence; Desire is constituted by that non-presence, and therefore, its

‘reality’ can never be articulated. In this sense, Desire may be thought of as a motive and not a thing; in this sense, desire can be linked to transcendence. Desire sends me out seeking for something beyond me that will never be realized but for which I continue to search. To pursue desire, then, is to maintain faith. Perhaps in my dream I cannot get home, and so I awaken to continue the dream that I have a home that I seek.

Desire always leads me to move beyond my present self as it has become defined by some past, and in this sense, Desire is a quest for what I do not yet know and must yet learn. I can in rationality define my goal, but I can define my goal only in retrospect. Lacan (1978) says

And there is only one method of knowing that one is there, namely, to map the network. And how is a network mapped? One goes back and forth over one’s ground, one crosses one’s path, one cross-checks it always in the same way . . . . (p. 45)

We know ourselves always in retrospect, but ironically, when we attain this knowledge, we are no longer there. We have already moved someplace else. We are strangers in a strange land. In this perspective, home is that toward which we always head but never arrive until too late; alas, upon arrival, we are no longer there.

In his work in philosophy and theology, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1959) seems to prefigure Lacanian psychology. Heschel posits an unknowable self realized in action but understood partly and temporarily only in retrospect. Heschel writes:

All we know of the self is its expression, but the self is never fully expressed. What we are, we cannot say; what we become, we cannot grasp. It is all a cryptic, suggestive abbreviation which the mind tries in vain to decipher. (p. 62)

Our goal is to become the self, though this achievement can never be completed. That home to which I cannot return I don’t really know; if it is where I head, I know not where I go, but only that I go. Home is always beyond me. But Heschel (1959) says, when we seek what is always beyond me, the transcendent, we are able to go beyond the mundane, diurnal world.

It is not from experience but from *our inability to experience* what is given to our mind that certainty of the realness of God is derived. It is not the order of being but the transcendent in the contingency of all order, the allusions to transcendence in all acts and all things that challenge our deepest understanding. (p. 65)

It is always what *else* is suggested in the things of this world, the surplus, that the hints of our desire are recognized. That desire is the self that we do not yet know but for which we quest. We do not know who we are, and we continue to seek that knowledge of ourselves. In the present in our effort to find meaning in existence, we do not understand ourselves or our lives. “The essence of what I am is not mine. *I am what is not* mine. I am that I am not . . .” (Heschel, 1959, p. 62, italics in original). We are always more than we know but less than we can ever be. Lacan’s limitless insatiable Desire is Heschel’s illimitable, insatiable faith. Home is where I head but to which I can never arrive. In this perspective, my dreams are not about return but about its wonderful impossibility.

Lacan’s Desire and Heschel’s Faith approach knowing not in belief but in action. I realize my desire by leaving home and engaging in the world; I experience my faith in action in the world. I

am motivated by Desire, and motivated by it, I exceed myself by finding what I did not previously know existed. In going beyond the self, by responding to the mystery of the world, the self transcends the world and responds, in Heschel's words, to God, and in Lacan's forms, to Desire. Heschel says that the self's origin and meaning do not derive from me: I came into the world despite my will, and I am not what *I* claim to be, for that meaning exists only in the past. Heschel argues that the self is a fiction because what I know as myself comes "as a transcendent loan" (1959, p. 62). I return the debt by seeking the transcendent and continue to seek that which is never wholly knowable or realizable. This formless, unstructured and absolute demand has become "metonymic of desire as such—of that within . . . that surpasses all articulable demands" (Eagleton, 2009, p. 147). I am Desire. As Eagleton says (2009), Desire is the ground of my Being "under which it is impossible to delve" (p. 141). The only true ethic is to be true to my Desire. That desire leads me out into the world but cannot be satisfied in it because to realize Desire would be to die. Desire must always be what I yet seek, and therefore, represents a surplus out in the world. Heschel (1955) says,

in order to be a man, man must be more than a man. The self is spiritually immature; it grows in the concern for the non-self . . . There is no joy for the self within the self. Joy is found in giving rather than in acquiring; in serving rather than in taking. (p. 399)

Perhaps this commitment results from the fact that to acquire is always insufficient and unsatisfying. I might say that Desire sends us away from home and out seeking into the world not to acquire but to provide. "Just as our sense of the ineffable goes beyond all words, so does the coercion for wholeheartedness, the power for self-transcendence, go beyond all interests and desires" (Heschel, 1955, p. 399). Ontologically, desire is unsatisfiable; like Sisyphus' endless task, we never achieve desire's end, but the ethical life does not compromise with the attempt. Desire is Ulysses' quest to strive, to seek to find but not to yield. The only Real is my desire, but my desire has no objective reality. The home for which I seek is always beyond my reach; that is its value.

Perhaps it is from this that derives the Deuteronomic command, "Justice, justice thou shall pursue" (16:20). Justice as the object of my pursuit—of my Desire—creates an ethics and my stance in the world; it is the ground of my being. The Prophet Micah says that what God requires of me is to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. My capacity to do the latter, of course, depends on my pursuit of the former and that pursuit entails action in which I become my self. Desire may send me out into the world, but it is the pursuit of Justice in which my Desire is realized and that defines who I am. The prophet Isaiah chastises the people:

Is not this what I require of you as a fast: to loose the fetters of injustice, to untie the knots of the yoke, to snap every yoke and set free those who have been crushed? Is it not sharing your food with the hungry, taking the homeless poor into your house, clothing the naked when you meet them and never evading a duty to your kinfolk? (57:5–8)

The task is impossibly hard, but as the Rabbis say, it is not necessary that I complete the task but only that I continue its pursuit. I become what I will next do, and I am not what I am now. Our will, Heschel acknowledges, is not our own, and our freedom resides in an immeasurable responsibility. This sense of responsibility seems the basis of Levinasian ethics. Terry Eagleton (2009) says that for this very Jewish philosopher,

Ethics must govern behaviour, but cannot be reduced to it. As an infinite obligation to the Other, it is the source of every day morality; but it also appears as a domain quite distinct from the diurnal. The ethical must not be confounded with the quantifying, workaday world of rules, codes, obligations, conventions and specific injunctions. Yet general codes and institutions (politics) must somehow be derived from an irreducibly singular relationship (ethics). (p. 243)

Ethics is the transcendent category toward which all behavior aspires but can never be fully achieved. Ethics, however, underlies my daily activity. “The incommensurable must give birth to the commensurable” (Eagleton, 2009, p. 243). I might seek home, but no home can contain me.

My desire for home may be identified also with Christopher Bollas’ notion of the ‘unthought known.’ Bollas (1989, pp. 213–14) posits this ‘unthought known’ as “knowledge that as yet is not thought.” These unthought knowns derive from the individual’s psychic genera, the organizing psychic structures based in a necessity for “inner organization, pattern, coherence, the basic need to discover identity in difference without which experience becomes chaos” (Milner, 1987, p. 84) and seem to me akin to Lacan’s inarticulable Desire and Heschel’s pursuit of the transcendent. These psychic genera are the nucleus about which the world is organized, from which an outlook on life may be derived, and from which new questions and works may be secured. Bollas (1992, p. 69) says: “Psychic genera are wished-for psychic workings which reflect the subject’s introjective choices as he feels free to follow the unconscious articulations of his own idiom and are part of the eros of form.” Genera facilitate engagement with the world by promoting and renewing contact in it to evoke affective and ideational states that are the self. These genera might be understood as bits of experience (ideas, words, images, experiences, affects) when contact with the world evokes intense psychic interest that is internalized and unconscious. These genera scan the world of experience for phenomena related to such inner work—to desire; they lead me out into the world seeking for what I do not yet know will enable the expression and elaboration of the various aspects of myself. The unthought known is an intricate web of relations whose logic can never be known in advance but which can be verbally and/or experientially articulated in hindsight.

Bollas’ theories concerning the foundations and evocations of human character accords with that of Lacan (1978), who wrote:

Before strictly human relations are established, certain relations have already been determined. They are taken from whatever nature may offers as supports . . . Nature provides . . . signifiers, and these signifiers organize human relations in a creative way, providing them with structures and shaping them. (p. 20)

Lacan’s open signifiers are akin to Bollas’ psychic genera: Both already exist in the world, both must be discovered by the individual, and both gain meaning in human relations. Bollas’ psychic genera and Lacan’s signifiers are the sources of Desire but are not equal to it. My idea of home derives from all and none of the homes which I have experienced; home is the object of my desire, but no single home (or even all of them) can contain that desire. I must go forth from my home. There is precedence for such leavings.

## Variations on a Theme of Home

*Genesis* is filled with dreams and home-leavings of the type about which I have been speaking; home leavings, indeed, seems to be the central theme of this first book of the Bible. I think first of Adam and Eve, cast out of home into the world to toil and to labor “all the days of your life,” and destined to suffer pain in childbearing “until you return to the ground” (3:19). But it is interesting to consider that having left their paradisiacal home *in* the Garden, they must now begin the unfinishable work of repairing the world *outside* Eden. Though following their expulsion Adam and Eve immediately have children, their place of residence—their home—is never noted. They must, it is assumed, create their own home in working the land. Having been banished from Eden, Adam and Eve never arrive home.

And I think of Cain. Condemned to wander—we are told Cain settles in the land of Nod, East of Eden, but in Hebrew *Nod* means wandering. Denied support from the soil in which he attempted to hide his brother’s blood, Cain founds urban culture, itself characterized by a sense of rootlessness and transiency. In these early stories, Torah suggests that home is the place from which to go to engage in the world; home must be transcended.

And I think of the patriarch, Abraham née Abram, who hears the word of God say to him: Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make your name great, And you shall be a blessing, I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you; And all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you” (*Bereshit*, 12: 1–3).

Immediately, Abram departs his familial home and begins his lifelong wanderings. Abraham’s is a tale of great promise, but he is continually tested and sorely tried, and finally, never achieves the secure home he has left behind. Indeed, one could say that Abraham’s home leaving is never followed by a home coming. God continually promises Abraham that his offspring will be as plentiful as the dust of the earth and will occupy the land that God has promised, but it is only the Cave of Machpelach in which Abraham will bury Sarah, née Sarai, and be himself buried that he will ever own and can call home. Having once left home, Abraham appears for the rest of his life to live a somewhat nomadic existence. When he dies, Abraham is buried by his two sons, both of whom remain understandably alienated from their father, in Machpelach. Though the land has been promised to him, Abraham never acquires the land. He is home, it might be said, only in the directive of his God: go forth to a land that I will show you.

To what does Abraham respond when he goes forth from his home? Of course, I have been taught that Abraham responds to the word of God, but I have always wondered how Abraham knew that it was God who spoke to him. I might posit now that it was the word of God that Abraham heard, but it was speaking not *to* but *out* of Abraham. What Abraham followed was Desire, the unthought known. Once content and even complacent, at some moment in his young life,<sup>1</sup> Abraham suddenly experiences a radical estrangement. One story relates that Terah, Abraham’s father, kept a shop which sold statues of the local idols. One day Terah left Abraham to mind the store. Abraham smashed all of the idols but one, and when his father returned and looked about, he was appalled to discover his entire inventory in irrecoverable pieces. Calling his son to him, Terah demanded to know what had occurred, and Abraham reported that there had been some argument amongst the idols, and the largest idol had taken a stick and smashed all of the smaller idols. Terah rebuked his son, saying that the idols were of clay and wood and could



not become animate, and Abraham responded questioningly how it was, then, that his father could believe in such lifeless gods.

This is a lovely story that I have been told for decades, indeed, that I yet tell even now. But I have never really known what provoked Abraham's discomfort with the idols in the first place that could have led to his smashing of them. According to the story, no sooner did he break all of the idols than he received a word from God to leave his father's home. What thought provoked Abraham's act; what idea provoked Abraham's thought? What provoked his leave taking? Perhaps he had asked for something. Perhaps it was desire, the core of Abraham's being. Perhaps it was the unthought known: the inner impulse to make order and give structure to life.

His father's home had ceased to be Abraham's home. When Abraham broke the idols, it was, it would seem, in response to Abraham's growing awareness of the contingency of the world in which those idols had provided some anchor. Those idols had once held the world in place, and smashing them left the world without meaning. Abraham went forth to make meaning. Eagleton (2009) writes:

Whenever we stumble in literary works across a desire which starkly isolates a protagonist; renders him or her strange to themselves; expresses an ineluctable inner need; manifests an adamant refusal to compromise; invests itself in an object more precious than life itself; maroons a character between life and death, and finally bears him or her inexorably to the grave, we can be reasonably sure that we are in the presence of the Real. (p. 190)

That Real is the formlessness that is Desire, and this Desire is the foundation of Being. What Abraham sought was inexpressible and unachievable; his heroism consists of his willingness to pursue Desire anyway. To pursue that Desire was the only way to become Abraham and to give sense to his world. Thus the Torah recounts that while Abraham was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day, three days after he had circumcised himself, Ishmael, and all the people of his household, Abraham lifted his eyes and saw three men standing near him. I imagine Abraham in great pain, recovering from a not inconsiderable procedure. Yet, as soon as Abraham saw the travelers,

he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground, he said, "My lords, if it please you, do not go on past your servant. Let a little water be brought; bathe your feet and recline under the tree. And let me fetch a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves; then go on . . . (Genesis, 18:3–5)

Abraham satisfies Desire by going out into the world and serving it. It is almost always his first response, and when he does not follow it, he suffers, as when he attempts to pass Sarah off as his sister in order to save his own life.

I think Abraham acts on Desire when he is most Abraham, exemplified to me foremost in his pleadings for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Starting with a standard of fifty righteous people who might be found in those wicked cities and for whom the cities might be saved, Abraham finally says, "Let not my Lord be annoyed and I will speak but once: What if ten would be found there?" (Genesis, 18:32). It is this pursuit of justice, perhaps, that sends Abraham from his home and out into the world. It was perhaps this same Desire that led him to hear the word of God: Go, get you forth from your father's house and land to a land that I will show you. It is, I think, the land of Abraham's unthought known where he will discover the objects with which he

can create his home wherever he might find himself. It is not reality that Abraham seeks, for indeed, there is much of that about him in his father's home. Rather, Abraham goes forth under the impetus of the Real. Desire leads Abraham to see any single object, but it is not the object that he desires.

What I seek in reality is not the Real. That Real, the only true Ethics, is the source of my being, and to follow it is the attempt to be true to one's being.

Isaac, Abraham's son, also lives his life as a veritable homeless wanderer. Isaac first leaves home following his binding and near-sacrifice by his father, Abraham, on Mount Moriah. In fact, one story tells that following the traumatic event Isaac does not descend the mountain with his father but, rather, descends on the other side from his father and travels to Ishmael's home, Isaac's brother who was at Sarah's insistence cast out by Abraham. I suspect the two brothers had a great deal to talk about. But here Isaac would be merely a guest at his brother's home. Upon leaving, Isaac returns "from the vicinity of Beer-lahai-roi, for [Ishmael] was settled in the region of the Negeb" (Genesis, 24:62). Upon his return, Isaac meets and marries Rebekah, a woman who has been chosen for him by his Father from amongst his kin. Having apparently fallen in love at first sight, it is not, however, to his own home that Isaac carries his wife: "And Isaac brought her into the tent of Sarah his mother; he married Rebecca, she became his wife, and he loved her; and thus was Isaac consoled after his mother" (Genesis, 24:66–67). Clearly, Rebekah fills not his mother's place but the emotional space left by her death. Rebekah becomes the object of Isaac's desire, but he never quite realizes his Desire. He goes nowhere, returning to his mother's tent and not to his own. It is only after Abraham's death that "God blessed Isaac, his son," who then leaves his father's home and travels back to Beer-lahai-roi and near his brother, Ishmael (Genesis, 25:11). Though Isaac does not seem to leave home, he also never appears to be at home. Isaac seems to follow not his own Desire but to be subject to the Desire of others. He redigs his father's wells.

Famine plagues the land, however, and Isaac must go in search of sustenance, but God commands Isaac not to journey to Egypt where perhaps the food is plentiful but to remain in Gerar, where he is a stranger, albeit a wealthy one. Should he obey God's command, God promises, "I will be with you and bless you; I will assign all these lands to you and to your heirs, fulfilling the oath that I swore to your father Abraham" (Genesis, 26:3). That is, for Isaac as for his father Abraham before him, attaining home is to be a fulfillment in the future. Isaac does not, however, ever acquire the land, and though like his father Isaac becomes quite rich, his success resides in his exile. Isaac lives a nomadic life, living his father's life and not his own, following his father's Desire and not his own. Even as Abraham called Sarah his sister to protect his own life, so does Isaac pass off Rebekah as his sister to Abimelech to protect his life. Peter Pitzele (1996) says that Isaac's homecoming is one of the "son who returns and repairs the work of the father" (p. 149), but I remain curious what repair Abraham's work required. It was, after all, Abraham who went forth and never returned. Finally, after only four scriptural chapters, Isaac is gathered to his people after having engendered Jacob and Esau. Like his father before him, Isaac remains homeless for his life, buried in the Cave of Machpelach which Abraham had purchased at Sarah's death.

Finally, the last patriarch, Jacob, confronting the Real, ends up a wanderer for much of his life, always in pursuit and forever acting on Desire. Like his grandfather Abraham, during his travels Jacob acquires a new name—Israel—to mark the self who pursues Desire. Jacob traditionally has been characterized as a deceiver: He obtains Esau's birthright by trading a bowl of red lentil stew to his brother starving for food, and then Jacob tricks his aging and blind father,



Isaac, into giving him the blessing due the elder brother, Esau. What led Jacob to act in this way could be defined only by Desire; his duplicity and cruelty should only be subject to harsh censure. Torah offers no rationale for Jacob's callousness to his brother in demanding the birthright for food, nor for his willing complicity with his mother's deceit to obtain for Jacob the blessing meant for Esau. But neither does Torah record any regret on Jacob's part for these actions; Torah does not condemn Jacob for his acts. Indeed, the only semblance of sympathy for the bereft Esau occurs when Torah records, "And Esau said to his father, 'Have you but one blessing, Father? Bless me too, Father!' And Esau wept aloud" (Genesis, 27:38). Though Esau's pain is real, he is not offered opportunity for redress nor given any possibility for further sympathy. Indeed, Esau becomes the archetypical anti-Semite. Jacob's actions are justified only in their result. Truth to Desire sometimes gives legitimation to deception.

Jacob's life is characterized by deception, either that selfishly carried out by himself or that which is ultimately directed towards him: Laban tricks Jacob into marrying Leah before he is allowed to marry the younger daughter, Rachel, whom Jacob desired and for whom he had worked seven years. Jacob agrees to work an additional seven years for Laban to earn Rachel as his wife. Finally prepared to leave, Jacob says to Rachel and Leah, "As you know, I have served your father with all my might; your father has cheated me, changing my wages time and again" (Genesis, 31:6–7). Perhaps Jacob accepts Laban's deceptions as deriving from Desire as well. But just as his grandfather before him. Jacob suddenly hears the word of God tell him to "return to the land of your fathers where you were born, and I will be with you" (Genesis, 31:3). It interests me that now Jacob places full faith in that voice; earlier he had arisen from a dream and said, "God was in this place and I did not know it" (Genesis, 28:16). Earlier, Jacob had negotiated with God:

If God remains with me, if He protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and if I return safe to my father's house—the Lord shall be my God. (Genesis 28:20–21)

Jacob in his journeys has learned to trust Desire. Therefore, when he must leave Laban, he employs every means at his disposal: Jacob kept Laban the Aramean in the dark, not telling him that he was fleeing, and fled with all that he had" (Genesis, 31:20–21). Jacob has confidence in his actions.

But, following Desire, as it were, Jacob seems always to be endangered: Esau would kill him for the deceptions Jacob has practiced on him, and Jacob leaves home under this threat of death, travelling always alone. He has strange dreams! When he finally departs with his large family from Laban, Laban follows furiously, accuses him of absconding sneakily, and of stealing his private gods. Laban threatens Jacob with death. Jacob is following Desire: he would come home. First, however, he must confront one whom Desire has led Jacob to deceive: Esau. And before he will meet him, Jacob dreams again. Whereas in an earlier dream Jacob saw a ladder with angels ascending and descending the rungs, this time Jacob must actively wrestle with the stranger. He cannot continue home without this engagement, nor can he rise from the battle unscathed: he becomes permanently disabled and acquires a new name. He may go forward to meet Esau.

With an enormously generous gift—perhaps merely a bribe—Jacob meets Esau; when Esau sees his brother, he falls on his shoulders and cries. Everything has reversed: the deceitful kiss Jacob has given his father has become Esau's earnest kiss of reconciliation. Esau's earlier heartbreaking lament is transformed into a heartwarming reunion. Jacob's Desire has led him to

Peace. In this reconciliation, Esau urges Jacob to “journey with him home,” to set up again, a version of the home from which Jacob had fled so many years before. But, Jacob chooses another direction: he “journeyed on to Succoth, and built a house for himself and made stalls for his cattle; that is why the place is called Succoth” (Genesis, 33:17). He must go to the land where his father wandered. When he arrives finally in Shechem, in the land of Canaan, Jacob buys some land and sets up an altar. True to his Desire, Jacob acknowledges that Truth.

When Jacob has returned to the place where his father Isaac himself had wandered (Genesis 37:1), Jacob was already 108 years old. Very soon however, the anguish of Joseph’s kidnapping turned that very home into the place of torment. “All his sons and daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, saying, ‘No, I will go down mourning to my son in Sheol’” (Genesis 37:35). Finally, for his final years, Jacob must travel again to become a stranger in a strange land where the long-missing Joseph has become powerful, Egypt. Only upon his death is Jacob permitted to rest in the Cave of Machpelach purchased by his grandfather, Abraham, As Rashi says, “Are the righteous not satisfied with what awaits them in the world to Come that they expect to live at ease in This World Too?” Desire in this world remains unfulfilled; in this world we seek to transcend by engaging in it.

Perhaps these stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs suggest that home leaving, the following of Desire, is the moment of transcendence, of acknowledging that we are more than the sum of our past, and that we come into being not in our arrival but in our seeking. My dreams, then, are not about coming home, but about keeping myself from home, to be out in the world where I am a stranger, and where the work is hard. God and Desire and Transcendence keeps me from my place at home. I become agitated and frightened. Where else could I be?

Interestingly to me, then, is the story of the prodigal son. This well-known parable offers an alternative to Torah’s way of thinking about home and homecomings. There, in the New Testament story, the younger son says to his father, “Let me have the share of the estate that will come to me” (Nouwen, 1992, p. 1). The son is motivated to leave by no voice and heads from home not to achieve greatness, but to indulge in profligacy. There is mention of neither blessing nor purpose in this leaving; not his reputation but his pleasure sits foremost in the son’s mind. And this son would leave home well-heeled, with his inheritance intact and in hand. When Abraham had left home, it was with all the wealth that *he* had amassed, even with all the souls he had made in Haran (Genesis, 12:5): Abraham would follow his Desire. But the prodigal son demands not that for which he has worked but his share of the inheritance. Having received his portion, he departs, alone. He has nothing to teach and nothing to offer followers. It is said that this request for his inheritance is actually a wish for his father to die. Henri Nouwen (1992) writes,

The son’s leaving, is, therefore, a much more offensive act than it seems at first reading. It is a heartless rejection of the home in which the son was born and nurtured and a break with the most precious tradition upheld by the larger community of which he was a part. (p. 36)

What distinguishes this home leaving with that of Abraham and Jacob is that the prodigal son takes nothing of his own, and Abraham takes nothing that is not his own. If Abram breaks with the tradition of his father and the larger community of which he was a part, it does not seem true that he necessarily breaks with his father and wishes him dead; Abram leaves home to become Abraham. But the prodigal son hears no voice; he simply rejects all he has ever known and

believed. He converts no one, and when he finally arrives to the place to which he is driven, he does not labor but rather loses in debauchery and self-serving pleasure all that he possessed.

Perhaps this profligacy was available only away from home, but then, what this son sought in leaving home required not a transcendence at all but rather just distance and a little ready cash. The prodigal son sinks into the easily available to satisfy his too, too, solid flesh, with what is finally, ephemeral and disappointingly unsatisfying; when his monetary supply runs out, he has no other resources on which to draw. Driven not by Desire, but from a refusal to experience Desire, wishing to bury Desire beneath the sensual things of this world, this son is not rootless; this son is merely profligate. There is no notion of transcendence, though in his debauchery, there might be a yearning for oblivion.

Eventually having wasted his inheritance and falling into wretched poverty, the prodigal son seeks employment in order to survive, but he cannot earn means for subsistence. Having indulged himself in satisfying his sensuous pleasures, thinking only of his present condition, the prodigal son thinks not at all beyond the immediate present. Unlike Jacob, this prodigal son tolerates no difficulty and little frustration. I recall that Jacob, too, leaves home under dubious circumstances but becomes a highly skilled shepherd, transforming his kinsman and employer, Laban, into a rich man. And to acquire what he seeks, Jacob tolerates hard work, deception as cruel as he had practiced, deprivation, and frustration. Jacob's arduous labor serves him well, and when he finally departs from Laban's home, Jacob leaves with large family to which he is responsible, and a very respectable herd of sheep and of goats. I wonder what skills the prodigal son possesses to offer for employment; what has he done in his short life? What does he seem prepared to learn to earn his bread? He becomes unemployed; perhaps he is unemployable.

Alone and far from home, destitute and helpless, this prodigal son finally "came to his senses" and to himself said,

How many of my father's hired men have the food they want and more, and here am I dying of hunger! I will leave this place and go to my father and say: Father I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired men. (Nouwen, 1992, p. 2)

It interests me that the story announces that the prodigal son, now starving and desperate, *came to his senses*: as if in his present condition the only rational and reasonable thing to do would be to go back home. As if his leaving home originally was the result of his taking leave of his senses. As if in his present circumstances, there was no sound alternative to the idea of return. He could imagine nothing but to go home to be cared for by his father, now incensed that even the servants, who had for many years labored in his father's household, were cared for and fed. And how certain this son seems to be that he would find acceptance and employment at his father's house; he seems sure that he will be welcome and, even more importantly, fed there, even as his father feeds the hired men. This return stems not from following Desire but from more pursuit of the immediate and the mundane. Indeed, the prodigal son's refusal of Desire all along has precluded his ever achieving much at all.

Now, the return of the prodigal son inspires a great celebration, and ironically, the father throws an elaborate and sensuous feast to celebrate the homecoming. Seeing his son afar off (I wonder how the father knew to look for his wayward son; or was he just looking out on the horizon and recognized the prodigal son), he "ran to his boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed

him.” And though the prodigal son cries that “he has sinned against heaven and against you,” the father said to his servants

Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the calf we have been fattening, and kill it; we will celebrate by having a feast, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found. (Nouwen, 1992, p. 2)

This celebration appears not unlike the life in which the prodigal son has engaged and that has led to his ruin and from which he has recently departed. This son who has overindulged in immediate and sensual pleasures is immersed again in the sensual. I wonder for whom the calf had been fattened and what celebration the father had planned. Certainly, there is nothing in this family’s history that suggests that revelry and festival has been customary practice.

And when the older son returns home from his day of labor, he hears from afar off the loud celebratory proceedings, and when he inquires of the servant the cause of the party only to discover it marks the return of his younger brother, the older son is (to my mind) rightfully incensed and refuses to enter the house and join the festivities. He says to his father,

I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any order of yours, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends. But this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property—he and his loose women—you kill the calf we had been fattening. (Nouwen, 1992, p. 2)

And the father responds not consolingly, “Your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found.” Far from home, the prodigal son was lost, but when returned home, he is again found. At home, of course, he had learned only to stay home, witness the fate of the older son, and even when the prodigal son moved away from it, he did not get very far. Now returned home, I wonder what will he now do?

Of course, despite the father’s invitation, the older son remains unsatisfied, but then, he too has seemingly never acted on his Desire. By his own admission, he has obeyed all of his father’s orders: he has done nothing of his own. I suspect he has spent much of his life in frustration and unhappiness and lived thwarted and dissatisfied, suppressing Desire. Indeed, the older son has spent his life pursuing the Desire of his Father and has never left home. Perhaps, even, he has ceased to dream.

I was once an elder son.

## Conclusion

My dreams are the articulation of Desire. And my desire sends me out into the world. These homecoming dreams are me. They represent the movement of my life: always a home leaving and yet always a home seeking. Get thee to a land I will show you, my dreams tell me. I go. In the classroom in the world, I create the souls I would take with me.

In those classrooms, we teachers might learn to lead our students out from home to find their home. We might help them dream of leave takings and homecomings; we might help them recognize and realize their Desire.

## NOTES

1. Biblical ages are indistinct. I really don't know how old Abraham actually was when either this story took place or when he left home.

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