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Quest for Home

RANDY HARRIS

S care master Stephen King soon will bring to conclusion the longest narrative in literary history. His saga of the *Dark Tower* has gone on for seven long volumes over three decades. While he has thrown every conceivable form of literature into this vast vat, at its heart the story is simply about a quest. It is a quest for what makes life meaningful and livable, a quest for that which holds all things together. In that he follows a rich tradition of quest literature, including *The Lord of the Rings* and *Don Quixote*. As such literature reminds us, the quest is very central to the human experience. We search for the ultimate, that something bigger than ourselves that gives life meaning.

I am occasionally asked how many of my students are really seeking God, and the answer is always the same—one hundred percent. Some of them do not know they are seeking God, and many have become deeply lost in their quest, but I believe Augustine was right when he prayed at the beginning of his *Confessions*, “O God, our hearts are restless and they find no rest until they rest in you.”

There are countless bad ways that we seek to fulfill this need to lose ourselves in something greater. In fact, this is one of the more helpful ways to understand idolatry. Idolatry is the attempt to find ultimacy in something less than God. But in a backhanded way, idolatry acknowledges the human need and desire to find ultimate meaning in something beyond ourselves. This search is expressed in ways ancient and modern, but the heart of idolatry is the same: looking for God in something that is passing rather than lasting, that is contingent rather than ultimate. Consider the prophet Jeremiah:

Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts, boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight declared the Lord. (Jer 9: 23-24)

In Jeremiah’s day—and in ours—people try to find their ultimate meaning in such ephemeral things as knowledge, riches, and power. We might add to this list all the addictions of our day—drugs, alcohol, sex, work and even play (for surely games are the obsession of many). And, what are addictions other than giving a God-like status to something that is unworthy of it?

We might be even a little bolder and point out the most pervasive idolatry among many of us—religion. For belief in religion and faith in God are two completely different things. Many of us find our whole identity and worth in religious activity, though there is often this nagging unease that something essential is missing. Our faith is in a particular church or system of doctrine or set of rituals that are always less than the wholly other God of scripture.



And of course, in these dark days, one is bound to take note of one of the more sinister and destructive types of idolatries throughout world history and in our time-nationalism. It is shocking and alarming to find how quickly and easily we invest our particular country or ethnic group with the loyalties that belong only to God and make our national quest a spiritual one.

All of this points me in a certain direction in my understanding of spirituality. Spirituality is the experience of homelessness here and the quest for the heart's true home, which is God above. Consider the haunting and beautiful passage from the writer of Hebrews.

The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp and so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city but we are looking for the city that is to come. (Heb 13:11-14)

In its context, the passage calls on Christians to leave the security of Jerusalem and Judaism and go to Jesus, the ultimate outsider, replacing security with disgrace. But why would one make such a disastrous trade? Because, here we do not have an enduring or lasting city; all the things, places, people, or ideas in which we seek ultimacy do not last. We are seeking another city, the city of God.

This then, is true spirituality. It is the recognition that we are homeless here. It is a refusal to invest ultimacy in anything that is here. It is the willingness to quest for and wait for true ultimacy found only in God. Though our hearts are restless, we will not rest in anything less than God.

This is why the spiritual masters throughout church history have engaged in disciplines of renunciation we often find strange. Fasting, solitude, and material simplicity are ways of declaring one's willingness to be homeless here, of the refusal to be seduced by even good things that become more important than they should. It declares we are not settlers here but pilgrims on a quest. Even church activities can distract one from the true quest for home.

The spiritual masters of the Christian tradition all agree that as we undertake this quest for God and God alone, he gives us glimpses of our goal. Now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face. We have those fleeting moments when we know with a knowledge, deeper than rationality, that God is calling us to our true home, and so we quest on.

But there is a danger here, which is played out in the parody of the hermit who in his quest for God has become quite useless to humankind. It is interesting that the Hebrews passage above, which proclaims our lack of a home here, proceeds to give very homely advice on how to get along here.

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confers his name and do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. (Heb 13:15-17a)

There is what we might call a *gnostic* impulse that must be resisted. It is the inclination to view spirituality as something that has nothing to do with the body, the world, or ordinary life. As the Hebrews writer shows us, even while on the quest for the eternal city, we worship, do good, share with others, and obey our leaders in the present city.

This is the real challenge of the spiritual life—to be fully engaged in the world in which we live and yet refuse to make it home. I think both Jesus and Paul provide beautiful examples of this kind of living. I have struggled to find a way to describe this approach to life, but the phrase that communicates it best to me is this: “hold all things lightly.” For idolatry is simply taking a tightfisted grip on things you can't hold on to

anyway. We can embrace and enjoy God's good gifts if we don't squeeze them to death—if we hold them lightly.

In regard to material things and comforts, both Jesus and Paul had time of plenty and times of great want. But these are matters of no great moment because they know they are not permanent; material things they hold lightly. The same is true of relationships, ministry, and anything else you might name—including life itself. These all have evolved as God's gifts, but they are not God; so they are held lightly, not as idols to be clung to and worshipped. Thus, Jesus commands to let the dead bury the dead and forsake family for the sake of the kingdom, and Paul says "to live is Christ, but to die is gain." All things are held lightly.

This leads to a theological stance that might be termed *panentheism* (not to be confused with pantheism). Panentheism affirms that God is *in* all things but is reducible to none of them. Thus, everything and every event can become the occasion for an experience of God, while none of them are to be confused with God himself. Thus, the spiritual person is the one who seeks God in all things but makes none of these things an idol. So in the interim as we wait for the *eschaton* when God will truly be All in All, we wait with idols.

So the practice of the spiritual disciplines is an exercise in attentive homelessness. On the one hand, they free us from idolatry, while on the other hand they call us to pay attention to God's presence in the world. This quest is never completed in our lives.

I suppose this might strike some readers as being a bit grim. After all, who wants to be homeless? Yet all who have entered this quest agree on one thing. When you give up your home here and seek God who is in all things but infinitely beyond them, you discover that ultimate reality (God) is love. It is this love that drives out the fear that comes from giving up the security of our idols. Instead of losing something precious, by letting go we gain everything.

The greatest obstacle to a true spirituality is ego itself. By holding on to ourselves, we cannot lay hold of God. Thus Jesus calls us to die to ourselves. All the distortions of spirituality are assertions of the ego. Consider the four primary ways we think of as expressions of the spiritual life—knowing, doing, feeling, and praying.

Each of these can become an idol in themselves that short-circuits relationships with God. If I just get all the answers right—have all my doctrine straight, then I will have a genuine relationship with God. If I just do enough good works of service, become a real Good Samaritan, then I will have a genuine relationship with God. If I just have an authentic religious experience with tears and laughter and that quickening of the heart, I will have a genuine relationship with God. If I just commit myself to the life of prayer—maybe four hours a day—then I know I will have a genuine relationship with God. And so it goes—God's good gifts turned into gods themselves.

In the end, spirituality is a refusal to settle. We will not settle for the addictions of our age, nor will we settle for religious observances masquerading as God. We will wait without idols for God to call us home.

In the meantime, we will embrace with joy and gratitude all the intimations of home God weaves in all things in our world. We live in the world even though we are not of it.

And the restlessness we feel we know is the divine love calling us beyond our own little ego world to the fullness of God! And so we quest on.

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Spirituality, in the end, is not made up of those times of retreat and contemplation and prayer that we rightly cherish. It is, rather, a certain stance in the world—the stance of homeless longing before God's love.

We display that stance by loving without choking, rejoicing without obsessing, ministering without manipulating, worshipping without idolatry, and laying our lives on the cross because in giving up ourselves we find our way home.

It is always easier to resist God's call than hear it. It is always more comfortable to make a home with an idol than enter a relationship with a living God who brooks no rivals. But in settling for what is comfortable and secure, we miss what is real.

And there is always that gnawing at the core of our being that Augustine noted so long ago, "O God, our hearts are restless and they find not rest until they rest in you."

Come, Lord Jesus!

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