



Commentary

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A longing for our roots

In his autobiographical novel "This Boy's Life," Tobias Wolff sums up the contradictory emotions and desires that he observes in his mother by saying, "The human heart is a dark forest."

We need to explore dark forests again and again to understand their dangers and beauties, or even become their caretakers. We can do this with real forests. They stay put. But what do we do about the human hearts that move so often in our highly mobile society?

One big human lesson brought home by the celebration of Lady Bird Johnson's life is how much human beings need a sense of place. The longstanding attachment of Lady Bird and President Johnson to the people and landscape around Johnson City defined who they were as human beings and became a rich part of their legacies. It made their hearts known to others and their persons revered by many.

Recently, professional pollster Matthew Dowd commented on the transient lifestyle many Americans lead. People switch jobs numerous times instead of staying with a single employer, as was the norm for my father and my uncles. Businesses transfer people from one part of the country to another. Dowd advised churches to adapt to people's feelings of being disconnected from one another, that life is moving too fast.

But how can we ourselves adapt? How can we build true friendships? My friend Les Smith told me about a young man from Uruguay whom he knew who was studying in the United States for a year. When asked what was different about our country, he said that here people often go to grade school with one group of peers, to high school with another group, and to college with yet another. But in Uruguay, his classmates in first grade stayed with him throughout his education and would be his lifelong friends.

The ancient Greeks had a saying to describe what we are experiencing now: "Someone who has many friends has no real friend." There are not only costs for us as individuals. There are also major social costs.

In ancient Greek city-states, citizenship and its rewards and responsibilities were originally defined by own-

ership of land. This made people feel rooted and gave them a deep interest in political decisions. People were identified by their single given names, the names of their fathers and the names of the towns where they were born. Children were educated together in public rituals. As adults, men served together in the army. Men and women participated in annual festivals.

In classical Athens, they explored serious social issues communally at their annual dramatic performances. Personal and family histories were known, and so the hearts and minds of people were also known. The famous parrhesia, serious freedom of expression, of classical Athens depended on people being familiar enough with one another to speak openly and freely.

My father lived 87 years in the Cleveland area. He lived his last 48 years there in a small community south of the city. He was an active churchgoer. More importantly, his fellow church acolytes, the senior citizens in the town's many organized senior functions, and the director of senior services all knew the darkest spot in the forest of his heart, the five years of my mother's decline into Alzheimer's.

Four years ago, I moved my dad to Austin. And a month ago, my brother and niece moved him to Santa Fe. There he is now dying. The dedicated people of hospice are assisting him. But his many lifelong friends and his true church community are far away.

Who understands what he carried with him for more than 50 years, the death of a baby boy 11 months before I was born? Who would know that my father read, clipped and saved an article describing the tragic death, at age 23, of the son of the director of senior services in his former community? Who would know the deep bond between them that their similar incurable sorrows formed? When that young man died, my father had just bought a tomb marker for the infant child he and my mother had lost more than 40 years before.

We need to be rooted. We need true friends to share the deep sorrows in our hearts. But right now, Lady Bird looks more and more like a truly endangered species.

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