



*Norman Carr*

I hover over my garden on my hands and knees every spring, look down at the reluctant soil, and proclaim in my most commanding voice while placing each bean seed: “Let the land produce vegetation!” (Genesis 1:11). My land complies with weeds in abundance and vast array; nevertheless, I love my parcel in Kansas because I am native to it.

But I also enjoy leaving home to visit a neighboring small town or a faraway exotic destination. Travel opens my eyes and mind, sharpening senses that tend to dull in the confines of my backyard. The next seven days record some physical and spiritual geography from my life’s unintentional pilgrimage that might provide inspiration for your journey.

The above photo with Lois, my wife, was taken last April in the medieval town of Besalú, Spain. We have our bags packed and will leave home again as soon as I tap “Send” to submit these devotionals. Usually we are in Wichita and attend Northridge Friends Church.

*BIBLE READING: 2 Corinthians 4:16-18*

“Are we there yet?” my ten-year-old voice agonized from economy class in the tail section of the family station wagon. Fifteen miles farther on our May vacation to Padre Island, Texas, I asked again at a volume calculated to overcome the drone of the 1950s vintage air cooler that hung outside the window. Like the contraption’s futile effort against the Oklahoma heat, my questions seemed to evaporate without producing much comfort. Yet, I asked again and again, until a voice from the captain’s seat announced that if I asked one more time, he would stop the car, take me aside, and emphatically answer my question.

More than a half-century later, I should place a personal historical marker at that spot between Kansas and the Gulf of Mexico where I learned valuable lessons about patience, assurance, and faith. *Patience*—the journey must come before the destination. *Assurance*—only my father could get us from here to there. *Faith*—although I’d never seen it, the Gulf did exist and would be revealed, and it would be wonderful beyond my comprehension and worth the miles of suffering. These lessons challenge a child’s short-term, backseat perspective, but the lessons test adults, too.

Our adult pilgrimages pass through weary states of darkness, sorrow, or struggle. At times we will want to cry out, “Are we there yet?” From our humble vantage point, we cannot see what God sees. But we can trust him for guidance and assurance that our glorious destination awaits just ahead.

*SONG: O That Will Be Glory for Me*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Dear God, guide me on my journey through this world. I cannot comprehend the wonder awaiting me, so grant me patience, give me assurance, and strengthen my faith. In glorious anticipation, I follow you.*

—Norman Carr

*BIBLE READING: Psalm 148:7-13*

“Here comes another one!” three-year-old Jack exclaimed as he heralded the arrival of a wave. He used his excited “outside voice” because the grownups seemed insufficiently impressed at his discovery. The cold Pacific swirled over his feet and foamed to mid-calf, but he insisted we linger on the Oregon beach. His knuckles turned white from fists clenched in anticipation—could there be yet another wave out there? Jack, our grandnephew from landlocked Kansas, focused on the horizon and stood in awe on his first encounter with a vast expanse of water. I stood in awe of the exponentially increasing intellect of this child who, before my eyes, began to realize that one wave follows another.

Like ocean waves, God sends blessings one after the other. Some simply swirl at our feet and quickly soak into the sand barely noticed; but large ones catch us off guard, spin us, and nearly knock us off our feet. Sometimes grownups need to be more impressed that one blessing follows another, to recall their first realization of God’s never-ending love. You and I should be more excited as we anticipate our next blessing, no matter the size or shape.

After a bleak winter, the promises of springtime should inspire in us a renewed attention to God’s blessings. I know Jack, wide-eyed and white-knuckled, would shout, “Here comes another one!” If you agree with him, say, “Amen!” Glorify God using your “outside voice.”

*SONG: For the Beauty of the Earth*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Dear God, because they keep coming, we often take your blessings for granted. Or to the other extreme, when the waves in our lives bring a stormy tempest, we wonder if you will ever send another blessing. May we neither ignore your blessings nor doubt their certainty.*

—Norman Carr

*BIBLE READING: Ephesians 6:10-18*

What's the second thing that comes to mind when you hear the words *omnipresent* and *omnipotent*? Duct tape, obviously! A roll empowers even the most mechanically challenged man or woman with handy-person skills. And fortunately it's everywhere, even in the middle of nowhere, which is where I lived for part of 1989 and 1990.

I arrived on the far edge of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia a few days after Saddam Hussein invaded nearby Kuwait and threatened to plunder refineries and the harbor outside my office window. He hinted that chemical warfare would soften any resistance to his aggression. To defend against poisonous gases, I gathered several rolls of duct tape and a few Pakistani laborers, and we climbed onto the roof of my office building to tape plastic sheeting over all the vents and openings. The desert temperature soared on the roof, but we reckoned mustard gas would be more unpleasant, so the ripping sound of duct tape continued to fill the oppressive air.

There are kinds of darkness and evil present in this world that we can barely wrap our minds around—forget about using duct tape in defense! Ruthless dictators in far-away places usually present obvious or avoidable threats. Some of us can prepare for these attacks; the more fortunate among us can ignore them. For many Christians the most insidious dangers hide in plain sight, waiting to attack the unguarded during routine activities. Our defense lies in community, along with the intercession of fellow pilgrims and the full armor God makes available to each of us.

*SONG: Faith Is the Victory*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Dear God, as you have taught, we ask for deliverance from evil. And in a world where evil seems to rule, may we find the best defense in wrapping ourselves in your armor.*

—Norman Carr

*BIBLE READING: Isaiah 40:22-25*

My knees protested every steep step of my hilltop quest. As I ascended, my shoulders dissented from bearing a pack. My lungs threatened to strike for more humane treatment. With my aging body in full mutiny, I sagged along a zigzag path to yet another castle in France. I had survived a 30-minute hike; while viewing the valley floor, I wanted to pat myself on the back, but I just didn't have the energy. Anyway, victory was not yet mine. At this juncture, the second half of the goat path to Château de Peyrepertuse loomed over me. I crawled and clawed the final meters to reach the top. The panorama would have been breathtaking if I had had any breath left for taking. My aching feet testified to the end of my glory days of back-packing.

The chateau was constructed in the eleventh century and abandoned in the 1600s. Many of its once-grand stone walls now lie in ruins, a poignant reminder that all massive and glorious castles and mighty kingdoms will relatively soon crumble. Kings, celebrities, the world's wealthiest people, and other superhumans will have their glory, albeit infinitesimal in time and fragile in endurance.

Whatever our worldly domain, we lord over it for but a few fleeting seconds before all returns to dust. How can it be otherwise? How might we endure? Our inheritance includes a kingdom on a hill, a mansion that will not crumble, and shelter, all from a Holy One with no equal. In his epistle, John tells us about God's gift of eternal life—a gift for the taking if only we believe (1 John 5:11-12).

*SONG: Holy, Holy, Holy*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Dear God, the world may grant us temporal glory, but you grant us grace and eternal life.*

—Norman Carr

*BIBLE READING: Psalm 113:2-6*

From my perch atop the steep steps of a seventeenth-century Hindu temple in Nepal, I looked east to where the sun rises, and then I looked west to where it fades. The distance to Wichita, my hometown, was the same from each direction. My trip around the world had reached the halfway milestone. In Katmandu's Durbar Square, I had crested our planet and contemplated my venture down the other side.

Culturally, the mountain kingdom of Nepal might as well be on another planet. Durbar Square, a UNESCO World Heritage site, concentrates a hodgepodge of exotic temples and shrines devoted to Hindu gods and goddesses characterized as humans, monkeys, bees, and elephants. One temple even sequesters a local maiden designated as a living goddess. As I sat in the square on a sunny spring day, I watched an elephant walk by, loaded with goods for the market; I posited to myself and a nearby, half-naked, brightly painted holy man: "I'm not in Kansas anymore."

I was not even in a Christian nation. Or was I? Psalm 113 insists God reigns from a throne above all gods. He reigns over nearby Mount Everest, the highest peak on the planet. He reigns over this Asian nation and all nations that have been and will ever be. He reigns from such heights that he must stoop down to look on the heavens and the earth. Yet, stoop he did to lower his only Son, placing him among idolaters, unbelievers, and other sinners. God reigns on this side and that. He reigns over there and over here. He reigns.

*SONG: He Reigns*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Dear God, of all the kings and kingdoms that were or will ever be, none are your equal. Your presence is everywhere; you are mighty to save all who believe.*

—Norman Carr

*BIBLE READING: Mark 14:35-37*

Simione and I walked through the rain forest on a dot of land near the bottom of the world. A strong, silent Fijian in his seventies, Simione had a white afro that looked like a huge dandelion gone to seed. If I blew on his head, surely the hair would scatter in the breeze. He walked slowly so that I, half his age, could keep up. The fertile mud squished between our toes and jungle birds chattered as we traveled the path to his garden.

Two months had passed since we last visited, so I needed to ask, “How’s your cow?” Simione thought longer than most people before speaking, but in his time—and in a voice that sounded like Harry Belafonte—he answered, “Fine. She’s dead.” A couple of decades later in my Kansas garden, I still think back on that day in Fiji with amusement and fondness for Simione’s sincere, humble words of acceptance.

Another garden event provides me a lasting, vivid impression. The Gospels illustrate a scene of dramatic humility and submission in Gethsemane as Christ bows low in prayerful contemplation. The dark hours he predicted (Mark 10:32-34) now loom; however, omnipotent God can circumvent the suffering—if it be his will. Jesus bids that God’s will be done because only God can bring peace to this extraordinary garden. Even as the Lamb of God faces the wolves of the world, Jesus rises with assurance that God grants peace. A few hours after his crucifixion, Jesus would rise again, victorious over death. Let us bow in humble adoration to the risen Christ.

*SONG: How Great Thou Art*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Dear God, our ground level perspective limits our vision and understanding. You give us faith for the unseen. Because of our faith, we pray not our will, but your will be done.*

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*BIBLE READING: Ephesians 2:4-10*

God created the earth and pronounced it good, giving me reason enough to expect wonder in my travels around the world. Along with great expectations, I begin each overseas trip with shiny credit cards, tightly packed clothes I'd never wear at home (such as T-shirts declaring "I'm With Gorgeous"), travel guides and a camera, and—if I remember her during the last-minute excitement,—my wife (see T-shirt above). My trips end with a frantic dash to the airport with Gorgeous, jet lag, battered luggage, credit cards singed from overuse, and a souvenir T-shirt proclaiming "I Heart Wherever." Despite the toll, I'm enriched for having encountered people and places new to me.

Earthly spectacles, however majestic, are temporal. Yes, God created the earth and sent his Son to restore those who inhabit it; But his glory—and mine through Christ's sacrifice—resides in heaven, unseen and eternal.

Christ's journey on earth was temporal and ended with his battered body nailed to a cross. We may look down at the foot of the cross where his tormentors gambled for his clothes, then look up at the Son of Man to see evil's victory over flesh and blood. However, if we have faith to look higher and beyond the dark clouds, we see not a journey's end, but a homecoming. We see not a parting from this world, but a reunification of Son and Father. We see not what was taken from us, but the redemption Christ offers. We see not death, but the eternal life that waits. We see all this not through our eyes, but through our faith.

*SONG: Precious Lord, Take My Hand*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Dear God, our monuments and palaces are but dust waiting to blow away. The true wonder is that you so loved the world that you sacrificed your Son for us.*

—Norman Carr