



**On the Road Home**

***No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; ... any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; IT TOLLS FOR THEE.***

***FROM: Devotions XVII by John Donne***

Dear Opal,

The photograph chosen for this letter titled, *On the Road Home*, was carefully selected because it depicts a somber mysterious tenor to onlookers. Since the subject is that of an old dirt road winding its way over rugged terrain that appears to have been traveled by many generations of wayfaring strangers, the silence it exudes on this misty morning delivers messages for all detached onlookers willing to prolong a glance. The forest landscape dominated by mostly grays and blacks adds even a greater conundrum for those inclined to pause for a moment letting the mind be swept away into the realm of conjecture, a process that will allow the onlooker to analyze all the elements that singularly mean naught, but together, make it beautifully complex and replete with significance.

Thus, when dissecting its colors shapes and textures, it is astonishing to note aspects like the roughness of the bark on the dark tree trunks bent and leaning in a variety of directions as a response over time to changing weather conditions, or the width of the well-worn muddy tracks imprinted into the old dirt road formed by those simply traversing this neck of the woods on their sojourn.

Added to all this representation, can you imagine the life that is hidden at the very second the photo was shot? Might birds and squirrels be concealed among the hundreds of leaves that appear to be deathly quiet at the moment, along with various creatures that are camouflaged on the forest floor among the colorful wildflowers that are waiting for just the right time to open their rainbow of colored petals to the unsuspecting traveler?

Then, when envisioning the array of changes brought on by the passing of the seasons, nature presents a cacophony of ingredients for the human brain to feast on, doesn't it?

Actually, when one invites the mind to analyze the photograph from a more spiritual aspect, this simple but eerie scene can become a paradox of life for mankind. Allowing the well-worn muddy old trail to depict our own beaten track of life, new meaning can be applied to every human being that has walked the earth, no matter the location or time.

With this thought in mind, if one renames this muddy old road as the **highway to heaven**, can you visualize all the folks that might have passed one another

along this patch of dirt **On the Road Home?** After all, if one believes we are here in this place for God's purpose and pleasure, then nothing that happens is a coincidence. The people we meet face to face, go around, overlook, or pass by, are there for a reason.

Given this human composite, just like the variety of textures and colors explored earlier when analyzing the elements of the photograph, the same can be said for all God's creatures great and small. Some met will resemble us, while others will appear strikingly different. There will be people from all walks of life, ages, genders, and nationalities along the way. Some will be hungry, downtrodden, abused, rich, poor, physically or emotionally challenged while others will be career driven and financially well off; a fact that shows the creativity of our Maker; one who has formed each human being uniquely different and set apart.

Certainly, as we make our way along this route, no matter the season of life, there will be split second decisions to be made that will not only impact others, but forever be a part of the person we are for all eternity. Literally, our actions will present to others a snapshot of who we are as a person; a quick image of our value system and character... and become an element of what we add to the photograph of God's creation, to society as a whole.

As we journey along the **highway to heaven** God has designed for each of us, have we internalized and applied the fact that no matter our circumstances or schedule, we truly do have a minute to spend with both friends and strangers alike? Or, are we too busy accumulating material goods that require a bulging bank account to grasp the true meaning of the important things in life? Do we even look into the eyes of the person we meet long enough to notice what expression is peering back at us? Are we willing to touch the hand of a poor and downtrodden individual wearing ragged clothing, or push the wheelchair of a poor old soul or anyone that might be physically challenged? When a member of the armed forces is in our midst, do we thank him/her for our liberty that can never be labeled as freedom because of being won at such a high cost? And...are we available when the person is no longer in uniform, but is now a veteran in need of care from wounds that are hidden deep within the soul?

Given the rat race in which we daily find ourselves, one that can be labeled as a treadmill that is set on only the fastest pace possible, we probably shout out

angrily, "Can't you see I don't have a minute to spend with anyone else? Are you unaware of how little a minute even would mean? Since I have found time to go to church once in a while, usually on Christmas and Easter, doesn't that count for something?" And...so the beat goes on and on and on.

Yet, in the whole scheme of things, a minute may be the life line that saves another person in just the nick of time. Helen Lowrie Marshall thought so when she wrote the poem "A Minute to Spend" found in her book of poetry called A GIFT SO RARE as follows:

So you have only a minute to spend?  
Well, here's what a minute will buy---  
A word to let someone know that you care,  
A smile to a passerby,  
A bit of communion with God and His world,  
A "thank you" that's maybe long due,  
A deep look inward to change your sights  
And broaden your point of view.  
If you have all of a minute to spend,  
How very lucky you are!  
For a minute will buy a whole heart's prayer,  
And pay your way clean to a star!

Certainly, in the late 1600s when poet and spiritual leader John Donne faced a time where he found himself perilously close to death, he rethought the whole idea of man's interconnectedness in this life and penned words that leave little doubt as to his conclusion.

In fact, he surmised that because we are all part of mankind, any person's death is a loss to all of us. So thoroughly convinced of this, he penned the poignant words, "Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

Furthermore, in the book titled, "No Man Is an Island, it suggests that we all will die; the bell will toll for each one of us. And... when this happens, be assured that the one dying will not be focused on worldly goods at that moment but contemplating the spiritual works he offered toward his fellowman. Questions that will repeatedly swirling in the mind will be:

Did I do enough for others? Did I ignore the poor and hungry while I dined on the pleasures of life? Did I place conversing with a loved one or friend regularly at the top or bottom of my to do list? Truly, did I mirror the actions of Jesus as he walked the highways and byways of his earthly journey?

Opal, as I allowed the meaning of Donne's statement to soak throughout every fiber of my being, I thought of all the old folks that now need care for their lives each and every day and are discounted by members of the world community who are still functioning in the rat race of the outside that carelessly label these dear ones as "shut-ins" without a life worth living, it angered me to the point of exhaustion; especially given the fact that as each hour passes of their lives, their own bodies are in the process of aging. And...oh, how fast time flies!

Then, when I discovered the following words in an ancient book that were labeled as anonymous, it was obvious that someone truly "got it". How wonderful to discover that long ago, another individual endured the same vexation regarding this troublesome issue and put a pen to it by writing:

***"Shut-ins", we say, as we envision that multitude in the confines of quiet rooms, in hospital cots, or in wheel chairs, are set apart from their fellows. Withdrawn from the active world seems over. For them there is only the gray prospect of loneliness, pain, suffering, trying days and sleepless nights. And yet the handicap may be only of the body. In so many cases, the ministry of suffering has yielded a wealth of spiritual experience that has flowed out in freshening streams to enrich the world.***

***"Shut-ins" we say; yes, that the busy hurrying throng of humanity may pause for a while by these quiet "sanctuaries" and, entering in, behold the inner radiance of the soul."***

In conclusion, during this dark period that we all are facing due to a pandemic that has forced normalcy to be a thing of the past, have we stopped to realize the degree of how connected we are to one another for our very survival? Have we formed bonds through reaching out to others by measuring our own willingness to make sacrifices or go the extra mile through forming behavioral patterns that will stop the spread of the virus from reaching the most vulnerable brought on by age or compromised health conditions? Or, have we cast our eyes inward and used the time to hurt others through actions such as not wearing a mask, committing acts of violence, or unleashing a flow of harsh words? Just like the death toll that will sound for each of us one day, the hungry virus will feast on anyone and everyone without boundary lines. It supersedes all social classes, denominations, and political affiliations. And... last, the choices one makes at this critical time shows the true character of a person.

Opal, let us end with a quote from Timothy Keller taken from his devotional book titled, "The Songs of Jesus" that speaks to all God's children with the poignant words:

**"The more holy we are, the more our heart is bound up with others and with God and so the more we feel the sadness of the world. Jesus, the perfect man, was "a man of sorrows." Godliness leads us to be both far happier and far sadder at the same time, though the final note is always joy."**

Dear friend, please know how cherished and valued you are to everyone because of the choices you made to care deeply for the wayfaring strangers met along your way. When the bell tolls for you, rest assured that you will hear the words from the Master saying:

***"Well done, good and faithful servant. Thou hast been faithful over a few things; I will make thee ruler over many things. Enter thou into the joy of the lord."  
Matthew 25:23***

Feel now my hands on your forehead as we use the beautiful poem written long ago by Nellie De Bearn as our benediction:

*The Shut-In*

*She lives a prisoner within  
The four bare walls of her poor room.  
In the bright world she walks no more,  
Yet cheerfully accepts her doom.*

*And holds that Life is very sweet,  
As eagerly she looks and sees  
The golden sunlight daily creep  
Into her room, and with it weaves*

*Fantastic dreams of rosy hue;  
Delightful things---in which she sees  
The sparkling earth bedecked with dew---  
Green hills and vales and stately trees.*

*She lives a prisoner---and yet,  
She gets more out of life than we  
Who walk bowed down with care---and fret  
For things we are too blind to see.*

*Amen!*



*Love,  
Colene*