

1 Let Go of What You Left

We were excited but nervous. I had lived in Wisconsin my entire life and my wife, besides the two years she lived in Wisconsin, had lived in Philadelphia her whole life. That morning we got into our tiny car, packed tight with our belongings, and moved from Wisconsin to Arizona, driving across the country into a new frontier.

When you drive west in the United States, you notice how the landscape subtly changes. At a certain point, the colors shift from a palate of greens, blues, and yellows to browns, deep reds, and the pale green color of plants that have adapted to harsher environments. The landscape isn't all that changes—the architecture changes, the kinds of fast food chains you see shifts, and even the rules are different. (Did you know there are highways on which you can drive as fast as 85 miles per hour in Texas?) When you move, the transition from what was to what will be can be a visual experience as well as an emotional one. The emotional piece is where my wife was during the ride.

She talked about how she didn't like the cactuses and commented on the lack of trees. She remarked that the houses didn't feel the same and she didn't like the style. I felt all the same things. This was something new in a lot of ways, and it seemed the only reminders of home were the Starbucks coffee shops we stopped at on our way.

When we finally arrived in Phoenix after the three-day journey, we stopped to pick up supplies at a Target store. As my wife got out of the car, I spilled coffee all over her white shirt, and emotions boiled over. She broke down in tears, saying, "I hate this place, I want to go home." I felt a knot in my stomach. In that moment, going home felt like a good choice.

For the next few months we tried to look for the good things in our new place, but it never felt like home. We spent our time talking about how we missed the places we used to go out to dinner, our friends back home, and the church we attended. Even some of the things we didn't like so much about our old town we suddenly found endearing. We got very sad after those conversations, longing to go home and escape our current situation.

We had almost gotten through a year when I asked my bosses if I could work remotely from Wisconsin.

They reluctantly agreed to try it out with the caveat that they could call at any time for me to return to the office in Phoenix. When I told my wife the news, we were so happy. We began to make plans for all the things we would do when we moved back. A couple of months later, we packed up our tiny car and drove east, looking out the windows as browns and reds gave way to greens and blues.

Beginnings in Scripture

There is a story in the Bible about a man named Lot and his family. They live in a town that is filled with some particularly vicious people. The people of this town are so vicious, in fact, that when visitors come to Lot's family, the men of the town threaten to sexually assault them as a sign of dominance, power, and humiliation. This is horrific because sexual assault is absolutely evil and, in this case, the evil is compounded because these visitors are divinely appointed messengers. They've come to check out how bad this town is and are there to deliver bad news: God has decided that this particular place needs to be wiped off the map, and Lot's family, the only good people in the town, needs to leave immediately.

There are many layers to this story. It is a narrative that can raise a lot of questions. Many people debate the exact reason why God chose to destroy this town. Some people take issue with the fact that God is depicted as choosing to destroy an entire town of people in a divine display of capital punishment. There are scholars who focus on a dialogue Abraham has with God during which Abraham argues that the town should not be destroyed if there are even a few righteous people still in it and, through a back and forth bargain, God agrees that if there are as few as ten good people there, he will not destroy the city. These scholars wonder whether this means God changes his mind or if God is just humoring Abraham. If you ever read more about this story or hear someone talk about it, you may hear some of these questions.

They are good questions and discussions, but they don't tell us much about beginnings. One character does, though, and I'm fascinated with her story.

Lot's Wife and the Good Ol' Days

Despite Abraham's bargaining with God, it turns out that God isn't able to find even ten righteous people in this town except for Lot's family. God sends a message to Lot to leave the town before it is destroyed and

includes one minor but important detail: Do not look back.

That shouldn't be too hard. This town is filled with so many people who are violently inhospitable that the town isn't worth saving. This town seems like a place Lot should have left years ago. But beginnings aren't always that easy, and this seems especially so for Lot's wife.

Although the town that Lot and his family are fleeing isn't a good place, it's still home. Lot's wife is feeling that as she walks away. Perhaps she is thinking of friends she had there who, while not the greatest people, were still friends. She may have been thinking about her home and the memories the family made there or events that happened in the community. Sure, there were things that weren't good but she isn't thinking about them now. She is remembering the good things.

Distance always seems to round out the rough edges, though. As we get further away from something it is as though the bad memories fade from our view and the good ones shine even brighter. We all do this, even when we leave something bad.

We think about how good he was to us on our anniversary, even though we know we left because he was toxic. We remember the time we landed the big account

with our team, even though we know that later our boss took all the credit for it. We look back at high school, or college, or graduate school, wanting to go back but forgetting how we couldn't wait to graduate.

In those moments, we want to look back, but not to steal a glance. We want to look back because we want to go back. That's why the glance backward is dangerous. If we stop and turn around we will only see what was good and, if we aren't careful, we may find ourselves going back the way we came. There are moments when we need to keep our eyes forward and let go.

This is especially difficult in involuntary beginnings. Leaving a bad situation makes it easier to focus on the future, but when our beginning is the result of an ending we didn't choose, such as a layoff, forced move, death, or divorce, we may struggle to keep our eyes forward. In these moments it is important to work with people, whether they are family, friends, or counselors, who can help us keep focused on the future as we let go of the past. Trauma from a bad ending can keep us stuck for a long time, fearful to move on because we don't want to forget what we lost. We need people who can keep our eyes forward.

Lot's wife, unfortunately, can't help herself. As she walks away, the sound of the the town where she lived

being destroyed catches her attention and she turns back to get one last look—and she immediately wishes she hadn't done that. Her backward glance is her last. Lot's wife remains forever locked into a final gaze with the city she left as she is turned into a pillar of salt. Debates about the narrative aside, the lesson here is certain: Looking back longingly at our past—especially if that past wasn't as good as we think it was after a little distance distorts our memories—can prove devastating.

My wife and I moved back to Wisconsin in August, which is a great time of the year to be in Wisconsin. We did all the things we wanted to do: we ate at our favorite restaurants, saw old friends, and got an apartment twice as big with rent half as much as our apartment in Phoenix. We felt great about our move.

But just as distance can round out the rough edges of our memories, getting close can uncover those edges again. There were things we didn't like but had forgotten—not the least of which was the two months of subzero temperatures during our winter back. We misjudged what the community would look like when we returned. It had changed since we left, and we had changed, too. After the first few months home, unsettled feelings returned, and we remembered some of the reasons we were excited to move to Arizona. We

loved living in Wisconsin, but the return wasn't what we thought it would be. After a year in Wisconsin, my boss called me and offered a new position and a move back to Arizona. After a few weeks of discernment, my wife and I left Wisconsin again and returned to the desert.

Spiritual Beginnings

I've onboarded staff members into teams for over a decade, and I've learned to identify early the people who will make it in a new role and those who will struggle in their first year (many of whom will move on). The people who do well in new roles share a particular outlook, which dramatically changes their new beginning. Those who were successful in their first year had a funeral for whatever they left behind. Every one of them who failed their first year had tried to resurrect the dead.

Whenever we experience loss we go through a period of grieving. This period of time is important because it allows us to process our loss and move on. Many people fail to grieve, though, because they are afraid to let go. They want to look back at what has been rather than moving on. If we stay stuck in the past we

miss the new things that are beginning and the great opportunities they present.

There is a spiritual component to this that is rooted in the most profound beginning of history. When Jesus died on the Cross, it seemed like an ending—a horrific and unexpected ending. The followers and friends of Jesus believed that the story was over, but they were wrong. Something new began with the death of Jesus. Without that death, there would be no Resurrection.

To put it into one of my love languages—'90s pop music—"every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end" (and long before Semisonic sang it in "Closing Time," the Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca said it). Dying and rising is foundational to the Christian life and has implications for us beyond succeeding at a new beginning. God can do great things through the deaths we experience, but we need to be looking for resurrection rather than staring blankly at the cross.

The Cross, Grave, Empty Tomb, and Irish Wakes

Lot's wife wasn't the only person in the Bible who had a problem with looking backward. After Jesus dies and is placed in the tomb, there are a couple of people who struggle with looking backward. The first is Mary

Magdalene. She goes to the tomb of Jesus and finds it empty. She is distressed, believing that robbers took the body. Suddenly, Jesus is standing with her. There is a curious detail about this story. Mary doesn't realize it is Jesus and believes he is the gardener for that area. Jesus reveals himself to her, and Mary exclaims excitedly, "Teacher!" She runs to Jesus, but Jesus tells her to "not hold" him. Is Jesus just not a hugging person? This goes much deeper than physical affection.

Mary doesn't recognize Jesus because she is looking backward and, even when Jesus reveals himself, Mary still calls Jesus "Teacher" rather than Messiah or Lord. She remembers who Jesus was, or who she thought he was, as a rabbi. She was looking backward, and it prevented her from seeing the Resurrection right in front of her.

The same thing happens to two of Jesus's disciples after the burial. They are returning to their home city when Jesus begins walking with them. Again, they don't recognize Jesus right away. Instead, they tell Jesus (who they think is a new travel companion) all about the ending. Jesus helps correct their vision and, eventually, reveals himself to them.

We do this, too. We get focused on endings and fail to see new beginnings. This is especially challenging