

CHAPTER 1

The Longing for Home

I was meant to walk these rails from the very first day.
It gives me a sense of leaving without ever going away.

Brooks Williams, “Railwalker”

The Indianapolis, Cincinnati, & Lafayette Railroad first came through the town of London, Indiana, in the late 1800s, carrying passengers, freight, livestock, and mail to and from the major cities of central Indiana and southwestern Ohio.

From that time and continuing through the 1930s London was home to a school, a seminary, and a grocery store with a US post office on the first floor and a dance hall directly above. The Cozy Nook Inn was on the edge of town (an interstate highway would displace the Inn in the 1950s) offering reasonably fine dining and clean rooms for its time

and location, according to local lore. The town had a touring semi-pro basketball team and fielded an organized baseball squad named (of all things) the London Brooms. There were two train depots, a grain elevator, an interurban rail line connecting with other towns of the area, and a small white clapboard Methodist church.

Most of that was gone by the time I moved there in 1971 at the age of ten. The only commerce that remained was a small market where Ethel Bunce dispensed gasoline from two aging, rusted round-top fuel pumps outside and cold bottles of Coca-Cola, Mason's Root Beer, and Mountain Dew inside. On summer days and during the baseball season, she sold ice cream bars and Topps trading cards to the children of the community who congregated under the awning that covered the store's front porch. Nearby, the church was still standing, though I don't recall ever stepping inside. If on occasion the doors were open as I passed by, I would simply peer in out of curiosity, wondering, *What do they do in there on those uncomfortable-looking wooden benches?*

The railroad tracks were still there, used at least twice each day by what had by then become known as the Penn Central Railroad. The tracks were about forty yards away from the front porch of my home. I heard the train's whistle blow as it approached the London Road crossing, and I fantasized about hopping on board, like I'd seen scraggly-bearded men do in movies, and traveling to who knows where—anywhere but where I was, even if just for a few hours.

Many a day throughout all four Indiana seasons I walked those rails past the London Market and west a quarter of

a mile to a decades-old wooden trestle that spanned Sugar Creek. I would climb into the underside of the bridge and walk across to a concrete pylon in the center of the creek. There, I would sit for what in my memory seems like hours, watching the water run far below and occasionally seeing the undercarriage of a freight train as it passed overhead, the rails moving up and down with the weight as the cars rolled by amid a thunderous cacophony of sound. With pen and paper I would scratch out my thoughts, a foreshadowing of a discipline that would begin in earnest later in life—journaling in order to be in touch with what I feel, and what I think.

That spot became my home away from home then, just a short jaunt down the tracks.

And in ways that are mysterious and paradoxical, the town and that railroad trestle, which still stands, are in some measure “home” to me still, deep in my bones even though I now live five hours away. In those days, I would walk the rails to give me a “sense of leaving without ever going away,” in the words of the folk musician Brooks Williams. I couldn’t wait to grow older, to leave, to find out what lay beyond the confines of that small town. And yet something about the place beckons to me more than fifty years later.

Home.

That paradox, I realize, is not unique to me. Perhaps you’ve experienced it as well?

“We are a people in the business of trying to recreate our homes,” the writer and educator Christopher de Vinck says. “The greatest mission in our lives is to find our place. Where do we fit in? Where do we hang our coats in the evening?”

From what window do we gaze out in the middle of the night and feel safe?”

Many years later, after moving away to college, marrying, and having two children and jobs that pulled me away to southern Indiana, Tennessee, and finally Illinois, I traveled back to London. Echoes of Simon and Garfunkel’s song “My Little Town” and its refrain about “nothing but the dead and dying” being left there ran through my mind. It’s an apt description of the town, and yet it holds a wellspring of memories that have never been shaken.

“To think about home eventually leads you to think back to your childhood home, the place where your life started,” Frederick Buechner once said, “the place which off and on throughout your life you keep going back to if only in dreams and memories and which is apt to determine the kind of place inside yourself, that you spend the rest of your life searching for even if you are not aware that you are searching.”

As I continue to search for home, continue to long to find home—in all its dimensions—in more profound and enduring ways, I am keenly aware God has met me along the way. Those longings for home, some would say, foreshadow a desire for heaven—the heart’s true home. Maybe so, but I understand that longing for home is rooted deeply in our humanity. Our sense of home (or the lack of it) shapes who we are as people. Research scientist John S. Allen, in his exquisite study of the notion of home through the ages in *Home: How Habitat Made Us Human*, suggests the same. By his count, he lived in nineteen different dwellings in his lifetime, just one more than the count on my own list. And each of those physical

dwellings, Allen writes, have been important touchstones for him with “a feeling of home [that] permeates my memories of [all of] them.”

“Over the course of our lives,” he says, “feeling at home provides cognitive continuity in the face of a surrounding environment that is highly variable and that we cannot control.”

What do we make of this longing for home? At times I have felt my homesickness to be a curse, something to be avoided. At other times, I’ve received it as a gift propelling me to some new path, growth, exploration.

Many of us are restless wanderers trying to feel at home for the first time or recapture a sense of home that we have lost. M. Craig Barnes, a writer and seminary president, is familiar with this search. In his book *Searching for Home: Spirituality for Restless Souls*, he reflects on his own father’s journey, which ended up with him very much alone, dying in a camping trailer. Barnes writes, “It doesn’t matter how fervently the spiritualized among us protest that their souls have been saved, we all continue to wander through this life on the other side of the guarded gates of paradise, missing home.”

If he’s right, what do we do with what we are missing? As we navigate our lives and our longing for home, there are a number of avenues we can take.

Among the first truly deep male friendships I experienced was with Mark McMinn, a professor of psychology and author, as we met for years at a monthly breakfast, appropriately, at a railroad-themed diner. (Friendship is a separate longing I will consider in a subsequent chapter.) We’d meet at Danby’s Station and talk about life, work, spirituality, family,

and longing in a manner and depth I had rarely experienced. It was a challenge, then, when he informed me over scrambled eggs and toast one morning that he and his wife, Lisa, would be moving back to Oregon near where the two of them had grown up and first met.

McMinn's longing led to an uprooting and replanting in the soil (literally and figuratively) he and his family had come from, and they have flourished there.

"The drawback was the beauty of Oregon and the familiarity of the seasons, the geography, the friends, the culture," McMinn said. "We also longed to be part of the Friends (Quaker) church we had once been a part of."

McMinn and his wife found a small parcel of land where they grow the same fruit his grandfather harvested nearby two generations ago—strawberries, pears, apples, gooseberries. They live close to the soil, finding both physical and spiritual sustenance in the beauty and the seasons of the earth.

And yet, the longings persist.

"I recall Ronald Rolheiser's words, that life is an unfinished symphony. Even with all of the grace and beauty of this home, we have our unfulfilled longings that visit us from time to time," McMinn told me years after the move. "In a sense, we have learned to welcome these as our friends, too, knowing that these speak to the essence of being mortal and being human."

For him, returning to his native Oregon was a part of the answer to his longing for home.

Returning to the rural central Indiana of my childhood, however, didn't hold that true sense of home for me. An

uprooting and replanting in the home of my youth will likely never happen, regardless of my nostalgic feelings for the place and the people I knew. Two of my six grandchildren live near my current residence. Community has been built in this place amid suburban sprawl over twenty-four years. I have taken paths at various crossroads that have led in different directions, and I regularly remind myself of the wise if often-overused challenge to “bloom where I’m planted.” And so, the quenching of at least some aspects of this longing has taken other forms.

The notion of home in the Bible holds both a physical and a spiritual meaning, something that resonates for me as well. Years ago my wife and I began attending a liturgically oriented church for the first time, and I remember thinking (and feeling) as though I’d come home to a place I’d never set foot in before. It was as if I knew where all the furniture was located as I navigated the various rooms in the dark. The liturgy, with its structure of confession followed by the announcement of forgiveness alongside the Creeds, Lord’s Prayer, Eucharist, and passing of the peace each week, became rooms in my spiritual home—places of belonging. It’s one of the ways God has met me in this longing.

And there are others.

Home has become walks on a four-thousand-acre Nature Conservancy-owned tallgrass prairie with my naturalist wife, Cindy, watching (at considerable distance and on the other side of the fence!) American bison roam what had become a vanishing landscape of prairie and sustenance, now reintroduced and preserved.

Home has become quarterly gatherings of like-minded literary people in our home over a simple meal and conversation about books and the environment and how to make a difference in a world of strife and beauty, pain and opportunity.

Home has become winter walks through the spruce plot of a local arboretum, where the silence is amplified by the white bed below and the green canopy above.

Home has become solitary bike rides on the Illinois prairie path crafted out of an abandoned railroad bed.

Home is reading books to six grandchildren in person when we can, and through technology when we must.

Home. Even as our longings remain with us, we re-create home in this time of now-and-not-yet, and God meets us there as we are attentive to God's presence.

The ultimate expression of our longing for home is a yearning for heaven—a place we read about in Scripture, hear about in sermons, and perhaps read about in wildly imaginative books, some of dubious origin. Dubious origins or not, they relay a sense of true home, of arrival. Yet rarely have I taken the time to dwell on the subject at length. Recently, as I crossed the threshold of my sixtieth year, I've begun to think of it more often, and more deeply.

The Bible seems to speak of heaven in vague and multifaceted terms—part atmosphere surrounding the earth, part cosmic place, part “the dwelling place of God,” as writer Douglas Connelly puts it in his book *The Promise of Heaven*.

The emotional truth of this ultimate longing for heaven as the yearning for home pressed into me a short time ago when

I walked through the doors of a Franciscan hospital less than thirty minutes from the London of my childhood.

For as long as I can recall my father was a restless soul, but that was especially true in his younger and mid-life years before his health limited his activity. His restlessness contributed significantly to the eighteen dwellings and moves I experienced—four in a single year. He was a man who fit M. Craig Barnes’s declaration that “it doesn’t matter where you move, how fast you run, or how many new identities you try on along the way, you can’t escape the longing for home.”

For most of my mid- to late teens and all my adult life we were decidedly not close. In my memory more often than not my treks as a young boy down the rails to the wooden trestle over Sugar Creek, and my wanderlust for following the Penn Central line to somewhere else, were connected to my father and some hurt, anger, or disappointment, real or imagined, within that relationship.

For a time when I was in my thirties the distance between us widened to something like a chasm: the disparity between my hopes for the relationship and the reality I experienced in it; the desire for consistency, predictability, and presence in my life and the lives of my two children, and what I perceived to be the opposite with him. Throughout that time and despite the chasm, I tried to act on the Bible’s admonition to honor my father. I did so by consistently naming the three gifts he placed in my life: the love of baseball, the centrality of music in our family’s life, and the gift of my first guitar when he brought home for me, a sickly child, a kid-sized red and

white electric instrument and amplifier, along with a beginner's songbook, from which I learned to play pop tunes of the day such as "Wild World," "Peace Train," and "You've Got a Friend." In later years I did it by phoning him weekly on my commutes home from work, listening as he gave updates on the shows he'd been watching, the results of his favorite football and college basketball teams' most recent games, and how he was feeling physically at that time.

Small but consistent gestures. And then, suddenly, even those ended.

On a frigid December morning at St. Francis Hospital, my father lay in the cardiac intensive care unit. Monitors buzzed and pinged and signaled something significant was happening after hours of utterly no change. The nurse on duty walked in and calmly said, "It's happening," and unplugged the power cord from the wall.

"He's gone," she said somberly, stepping back from the bed.

He had died after four days of his family—four children and our mother—keeping vigil at his bedside. He never regained consciousness from a stroke. But literally in the instant we heard the words "he's gone," a Brahms lullaby played over the St. Francis Hospital sound system, signaling a newborn child had just entered the world in a nearby maternity ward. I looked at my brother, Darren, standing next to me and asked, "Did you hear that?"

It was a moment of grace, the symmetry of death and new life, of lost and found. It was a moment of gravity, knowing that our father, at seventy-nine years of age, would no longer

be present to cajole, fuss, or watch a ballgame with. It was a final recognition that the longed-for textures of a father and son relationship would never come to pass—a closeness, a mutual investment in each other, the creation of new memories together. And it was a moment of recognizing the reality of the aging process I didn't fully see in the whirlwind that makes up our daily existence.

“Home is a place that one is born into, that grounds our souls to that home that is with us wherever we are and that we can never separate from,” my Argentina-based missionary friend has said. “That home of ten thousand things. That home that *is* us. Within us. Connects us. In widening circles outward, as we learn to live and love and discover we are always, always, just walking each other home.”

As the nurse's voice quietly declared that my dad had died, I wondered, “Is this restless, wandering soul finally at home?” I hoped so, for him.

And one day, for me, as well.



It was a hot August day when I left my suburban home and drove four hours to the rural farm of a family member during a particularly challenging season. After a late meal and a hike through the forty acres of land she owned, with the sun fully set in the western sky and a shimmering canopy of stars above, my two hiking companions and I walked east on the black-topped country road. The darkness, created by

the total absence of light pollution I have come to know in my Chicago-area village, was arresting. The darkness and the silence were mesmerizing.

But even more so it was the fireflies.

They literally filled the meadow on one side of the road and the woodlands on the other, sparkling, shining, dancing, and beckoning as they lit up the sky with their yellow-green pulsing, silent rhythms. We continued to walk in silence, peering left and then right as the fireflies seemingly said to us, “There is light in this dark world!” It was a dazzling show put on by the natural world in a way I’d never seen before—or, at least, not as an adult. I am prone to melancholy, to seeing the glass half empty. That night, my cup was overflowing with joy as I walked and watched.

The wonder of childhood, running after fireflies with a Ball jar in hand, holes poked in the lid, came to me as if it were yesterday, and not five and a half decades ago, and it was strangely comforting. It was an odd and peaceful sense of home. In my mind, I began to hum the melody from a Paul Simon song from my childhood—a song written for *his* infant son—that spoke in reassuring words about fireflies flashing, the bearing of light, and the knowledge that everything would be alright, so I could close my weary eyes and rest. It was a reminder of the now and the not-yet home. It was a whisper of God’s care in the midst of my longing for home.

The Longing for Home

A Playlist

“My Little Town,” Simon & Garfunkel, from the recording *The Best of Simon & Garfunkel* (1999)

“Longing for Home,” Cherish the Ladies, from the recording *Country Crossroads* (2011)

“Railwalker,” Brooks Williams, from the recording *How the Nighttime Sings* (1991)

“Home,” Rich Mullins, from the recording *Winds of Heaven, Stuff of Earth* (1988)

“St. Judy’s Comet,” Kenny Loggins, from the recording *Return to Pooh Corner* (1994)

“Home,” Jack Johnson, from the recording *From Here to Now to You* (2013)

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