

Traveling Companion: The Vocabulary of Absence

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Helena Mulkerns wrote, "Absence: does the term sound less desolate as the world becomes smaller with our ever information-drenched, communication-complex society? Or is its vocabulary still, by default, a forced repartee, stemming from the fact that we often try to deny the distance is even there? We carry on regardless, as if the ache of missing someone is just not an issue....when you are communicating with someone who is far away, you instinctively edit what you are saying, into a form that softens the message. You lose the urgency of immediate contact, and the sting of the message is blunted. Although email is a great thing, it can still be deceiving. Some people use it very superficially, zapping one and two-liners back and forth over the Web and nothing more. If you are a good writer, you may have time to think things over. But the danger with instant communication is that of saying too much too soon – so you learn to be cautious in what you say – an extension of that vocabulary."

When I first read the above quote, I began to reflect on the implications of what she was saying. Some years ago, I met another priest at the airport as both of us were returning from vacation. He said, "I hate airports. They are sad places." On such an occasion, his comments proved true as we both left family and friends behind to minister to our adopted and extended family in the States.

Sometimes I think about the concept of an Irish Wake, an old custom where family and neighbors gathered to celebrate and mourn the departure of a member of the family or community to the distant lands of the United States, Australia or New Zealand. The chances of such a person returning to their homeland was non-existent.

Other times, I think about the passing of a loved one. During the days following his or her death, loved ones often speak of sensing that the deceased person is still alive and they expect them to walk through the door at any moment. The reality and finality of their absence has not hit home yet.

Others, with good intentions, suggest to the grieving person that "it is time to move on," "to get over it." Yet, coping with absence of a loved one defies our time limits. When friends move away from our neighborhood, we hope that they will "keep in touch." Intentions are good. Promises are made but reality tells a different story. We may keep in touch consistently for a while but the cares and absences of contacts choke off even the best intentions.

I think about what Helen Mulkerns said above about email. I detest those who use it superficially to pass on ramblings of nonsense. It seems that they have just discovered a new hobby and want to bore you with their platitudes and panaceas. I don't even waste my time opening such in their absurdity.

Recently, I received an email from a young woman I have known for several years. Recently married, Lee, works in the Congress in Washington. I will treasure her thoughts as she reflects her own absences and new beginnings.

Lee writes, "As we live our little lives we can't predict what images will stick with us at the end of each day. We are too busy to see the footprints of others. It isn't until we look back in some quiet moment that we see the imprint people have made on our lives. As I begin my married life and think about the idea of raising my own family, I realize how fortunate I am to be able to look back and remember some good things in my life-- and how those "good things" have made me who I am."

Advent is the church's way of reminding us what is absent in our lives and how our God uses a vocabulary of absence and presence.

