
STRATEGY FOR SANITY

Earl Palmer

I've been known to get lost in several ways. Perhaps I cannot understand the street signs—like being in an evergreen forest, yet holding in my hand precise directions that tell me to turn right when I reach a curiously shaped Douglas fir on the trail. But what if the hiker is an urbanite to whom one evergreen looks like another? The directions are true, the signs are in place, but the hiker is lost.

Or perhaps I know exactly where I am until a fog bank rolls over the ridge I'm hiking on. All my signs are everywhere around me, and I could understand them only if I could see them. I am lost where on a clear day I could easily find my way.

Then there's the lostness that happens when I am separated from the people in my life. Though I know where I am, I still feel lost from the people I need and want to be near. I think of a scene early in the film *Empire of the Sun*, in which a British youngster suffers a nightmarish separation from his mother and father in the panicked streets of Shanghai as Japanese troops march on the city.

A lostness particularly dangerous results from a deliberately wrong decision, when I intentionally disregard unmistakably clear signposts and set off in a direction where I either don't actually want to go or where I should not go.

Ideological and psychological lostness occurs when we cannot locate distinctive historical markers along our life journeys; we consequently become, in effect, non-historical people who are unaware of the contours of our personal landscape. We can become so lost in the present, so

tyrannized by it, that our sense of the past is a fragile, brittle thing.

The lostness of confusion blurs and distorts our vision. Chemicals, for example, enshroud us in a fog that prevents us from thinking either clearly or wisely. There are fogs other than drugs, too—there is emotional confusion that originates in damaging, unresolved experiences that distort everything I see.

The Making of a Lifestyle

However we get lost, it usually happens in the same way—gradually, by very small degrees. Only after I've taken very small missteps toward lostness is it evident to me that I'm lost. I

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don't know it—or choose to know it—until much later. Little patterns in my adolescence, for example, begin to disconnect me from others, so that—if unchecked—I can reach my adult years with an entrenched lifestyle of isolation and personal disconnection.

Just as the young-adult years are when such lostness is first and obviously manifested, so it is during these years that finding the path again can have its most creative and healing effects. For this reason the ministry of Christian fellowship among young adults is vital. Young men and women are able to survive major redirecting because their willingness to risk has not yet been replaced with those obstinate defenses that so often block adult growth. This willingness to change is

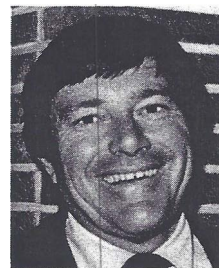
what makes the young-adult years so pivotal in the character development of a person.

Getting your bearings again is seldom immediate, but a process, an incremental finding of the right pathway. And those in Christian fellowship play a therapeutic role in all this simply by doing what we do best.

First, we have the promises of God, signposts that go all the way back to Abraham. We must highlight these signposts, wipe the dust off them, and make them clear as we thoughtfully and faithfully teach the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, we are in the business of friendship; it is a fairly natural gift in Christian fellowship—and it's exactly what folks who are lost need. Just being ourselves—with problems, faults, sins, and all—connected in friends' hip with the lost helps them find their way.

Finally, though confusion and deliberately long steps are more complicated problems, it is Jesus Christ who is the redeemer, not us. "The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light," Isaiah proclaimed. God is the best finder after all. ♦



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