

34. Letting Go, Part 1: Doorway

Whenever we had family gatherings with my grandparents in northern Michigan, the activities with all my shirttail relatives always seemed to fall along gender lines. There'd be communal dinners and games of pinochle until late at night, but otherwise, the menfolk hung outside and the womenfolk sat at the dining room table, drinking coffee and talking. As a young girl, I learned much about life and human nature this way: that men were unreliable and regularly disappointing; that women had to handle everything and work like dogs; that, as a female, I'd better get used to taking care of others instead of myself. The judgment and gossip flowed as freely as the Folgers during those long conversations.

In and around learning about cooking and sewing, canning and fishing, I learned some of the most deeply penetrating life lessons from these Ladies at the Lake—that life was arduous, hope was foolish, and help was not forthcoming. What we made of this hard journey called life was entirely up to us because we could not count on anyone else. Try as I might as an adult, I could not recall any discussion of hopes or dreams, of faith or goals around that table. The one story I remembered about my grandmother wanting to become a nurse had the bitter ending of her leaving school after eighth grade because her folks needed her to work on the farm. While my generation really was the first to have the opportunity to consider more fully what we might want in life, I've found it heartbreaking to have come from literally generations of hopelessness and despair.

After sharing this family history with Christopher, I realized, *Oh! So this is how you live when you don't believe there's a God!*

My people, they did the best they could, and they gave me some gifts in terms of teaching me how to work hard. But because everything was up to us alone, the fruits of our labor were fearful striving and an inability to rest. When you're all you've got, you find out quickly you're not all that impressive. And that's when fear can set in.

It is no coincidence that I came back to God in the midst of crisis, when all my effort and wiliness got me no further ahead. I was laboring in vain, exhausted, terrified. But long before knowledge or trust of God's provision made its way into my marrow, I somehow knew I wanted a different experience for Alex. I did not want her repeating my life. God used that deep desire as a siren song to draw me to him, because all I wanted was for her to not suffer, to not be abused, to not feel unloved or unwanted as I had. I didn't know what I was doing, raising her; I only had this image of somehow layering these foundational truths—that she belonged, she mattered, and she wasn't alone—as a protective shield around her. Naïvely, I believed whatever else she needed would come out in the wash so long as she had this firm base on which to grow. And so, I sought God and wise counselors, faith-filled friends and practiced therapists, and I began to consider that maybe we get to choose how we build our houses, lives, and legacies—that maybe we did not have to use the same materials and measurements as the generations prior. That maybe we get to ask for help.

I'd spent several years on this renovation of mine, tearing down and rebuilding toward how I wanted to live going forward. As with most such undertakings there had been times of great destruction alongside times of hopeful reparation, with seasons both verdant and fallow. But through it all a

picture became clear: My great-great-grandmother built my great-grandma's house, and my great-grandma built my grandma's house, and my grandma built my mother's house, and my mother built my house in the same manner as all the hard-working, long-suffering women who'd gone before. It was expected I would build the same house for my girl.

But Alex's house was erected completely off plan, on a wing and a prayer. As her foundation was laid, as we focused on our God, my life foundation started to shift as well. And this deviation caused another sort of fracture, because as much as I loved the Ladies at the Lake, as much as my heart broke for their suffering and hopelessness, I just could not follow their blueprint.

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Because of COVID, the start date for Alex's new job was delayed eight months, but when it finally appeared there might be a tiny window opening for her to leave for Japan, we had to keep our knees bent on the details. We did what we could ahead of time, but I had a sense that when the call came for her to go, it would be akin to a relay gun going off. And so it happened, as she texted me one lunchtime with negative COVID test results and a shaky question, "OMG, does this mean I'm leaving tomorrow?"

My heart quickened but I was reminded of what I needed to do and how I needed to do it. In my Type Triple-A personality fashion, I asked if she wanted me to be her admin for the next twenty-four hours. She accepted. So from 1:00 p.m. Tuesday until noon on Wednesday, our hours were full of final errands and paperwork, ridiculously overfilled suit-

cases, soft words, and hard choices. She jokingly accused me of speaking in what she called my “counselor voice”—low, slow, and calm—and I admitted I was trying to keep our collective anxiety in check.

Later that night, as James Taylor’s smooth baritone flowed from the computer speakers she’d gifted me, the music drew her downstairs to my office. As I turned to tell her how great the speakers sounded, she said, “I need a rubber band. And a huh-huh-huh-hug.” Then she started to sob. “I heard your music, and . . . and . . .”

Oh, my sweet child—and you’re not going to hear it like this again.

And things are changing in a seismic way.

And this was always supposed to happen.

And our hearts and eyes are spilling over.

We made our way to the sofa and I drew her close into my right shoulder, pure muscle memory, the way I had through every shared grief, every shared fear, every shared hope. I stroked her hair, and I reminded her of all the things that led her to this moment, the brick-by-brick-by-brick God had laid out for her. It was going to be alright. It was going to be *all right*. For us both, this was the proper order of things—a long build completed, the finishing touches celebrated.

When I finally got to bed, my thoughts drifted to the weeks prior to Alex’s departure and how my work with Christopher also was moving toward its natural end. One of my favorite Phoebe Snow songs, “I’m Your Girl,” had been playing on repeat in my mind. Written after her beloved mom had passed, she sang an ode to her mother-shelter, a poetic picture of the floors, ceilings, and hallways that contained their relationship and years. And so, in my mind, in that beautiful song, I shifted pronouns: *You’re my girl*. She’d been the reason

for tending to my wounds; to not pass them along. The reason for building a better home; to give her roots and wings. The reason for spending the time; to focus the dozens of seasons, the thousands of days on growing and healing. I cannot say such words to my mother, but I can say them to my daughter—because of God. And by his grace and after receiving a whole lot of help, I became the kind of mom to whom Alex could say such things. And if that's not some sort of reparational miracle, I don't know what is.

Leaving the house for O'Hare the next morning entailed checking and quadruple-checking, with wide eyes of disbelief and nervous laughter. I've made that drive a hundred times, but never with the weight of what awaited that day. Among the few good things that came from the pandemic was the fact that the departure drop-off area at O'Hare—one of the busiest airports in the world—was a ghost town. There were none of the tough, uniformed security officers barking, "I don't care! Just move your car!" So we got to have our moment, unhurried.

I held her as she cried, choked back my own tears, and reminded her again and again in crackly whispers that this was her doorway: She worked hard to find it, she was equipped to walk through it, and God had her back. Some guy out having a smoke took pictures for me, capturing our masks and our glossy eyes and her whole life stuffed into three suitcases and one bulging backpack. When I looked at those digital images later, I shook my head, incredulous: *She did it! We did it! God did it!*

It's been suggested that part of being a good parent is being willing to cut the cord—cord after cord, again and again—at the right time. Standing outside the terminal, I

recalled many lifelines that got us to that day and the one life-changing cord that awaited cutting with the utmost, tenderest love. And so, after one last squeeze, whispering momly reminders and gentle encouragement, I stepped back, caught her eyes, smiled behind my mask, and let her go.

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Not long after Alex left, I was reminded of this truth:

For you know that your lives were ransomed once and for all from the empty and futile way of life handed down from generation to generation. It was not a ransom payment of silver and gold, which eventually perishes, but the precious blood of Christ—who like a spotless, unblemished lamb was sacrificed for us. (1 Peter 1:18-19 TPT, emphasis added)

As much as it cost me to redeem Alex from what our people always did and knew, it cost my heavenly Father infinitely more to redeem me. But then I considered an earlier verse:

God revealed to the prophets that *their ministry was not for their own benefit but for yours.* And now, you have heard these things from the evangelists who preached the gospel to you through the power of the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. (1 Peter 1:12 TPT, emphasis added)

If I've learned anything in the past couple of decades, it's that God gets a lot of mileage out of his healings: they're never only for us.

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A long way through this silent season, my mother sent me a very brief email in which she apologized for not raising my

brother and I with any hope but, by her own admission, she'd had none to give. But Jesus himself chose Laurence and me, plucking us out of the demolition pile, giving us a quick dust-off, and beckoning us his way: *Follow me*. It's stunning. A translator's footnote for the word *evangelists* in 1 Peter 1:12 explains that the word in Aramaic can be translated into "extenders of hope." So, in being freed from the futile ways of previous generations, in Jesus making a way to God, what we do isn't just for us but also for others; we become hope extenders.

Maybe that is what God enabled me to do for Alex, and what he enabled Alex to do for me, creating a different type of shelter that offered protection, respite, hope. No longer Godless, we built that house together.

Organizational psychologist Adam Grant writes, "Too many people spend their lives being dutiful descendants instead of good ancestors. The responsibility of each generation is not to please their predecessors. It's to improve things for their offspring."² I pray I have done this well for Alex, and I marvel at what kind of hope she'll extend, beyond her childhood home, beyond what's held in her walls. All

El Emunah, The Faithful God

"Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations." (Deuteronomy 7:9 ESV)

I know is I sent her off to Japan that remarkable October day with that covering—to dream and create her own abode, with hope, with him.

Leaving home, grieving home, coming home, going home: Built strong, Alex will survive her storms. The girl's got good bones.