

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
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Are We There, Yet?

Mostly, when we're not here, we're there, Kem and I – every year now, sometimes two or more times a year, for many years, backpacking in the Grand Canyon. We love it with a perfect passion, love everything about it, even when it's 125 degrees, or a blizzard blinds us to the slippery edge of the mile-deep fall-away. We dream about it, plan for it, shop and pack for it – the entire process of getting there has become part of the epic journey.

Inevitably, though, there is a moment, late on the afternoon of our last day at the bottom. We are always at the same place – the confluence of the Bright Angel Creek and the Colorado River – and it is time to return to our campsite, farther up the creek, time to make dinner, sing grace, and eat, then wash up and turn in early, because, to avoid the desert heat of the day, we will be up again just after midnight, to make the long climb out by headlamp – 7 miles straight up out of heaven. That moment of turning away from the river to head back to camp is hard on the heart; it is the beginning of the end, and we always say that, always share that heartbeat's duration of sadness to leave what we love.

And then Kem always says, “Come back with me,” and I always say, “Yes,” and, in some way, at that very moment, the next trip, the dreaming and planning, begins again.

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When I'm able to show up in the present – in this very moment, neither ahead of myself nor behind, neither lost in the past nor seduced by the future – I am happy. The lesson is that the answer to the question, *Are we there yet?* is always, *Yes. There is here.*

This is from an *Appalachia* editorial by Christine Woodside entitled, *What I Learned from a Leo Kottke Tape Found at the Dump*:

“. . . My husband found a tape by guitarist Leo Kottke at the town dump in Deep River, Connecticut, and the tape still worked, and I started listening obsessively to [Leo] Kottke on my old car cassette player.... An early [song] ... completely grabbed me: ... *Morning is the Long Way Home*.

“[Leo] Kottke himself ... claimed to hate the words to this song.... But ... I ignored the strange verses and listened only to the refrain: *and morning is the long way home*. Something awakened in me.

“Whatever [Leo] Kottke thought he meant, those words explained why the mountains have changed me, from a slightly reactive and late-arriving person to a more deliberate and patient one.

“It was in the mountains where I learned that to reap the benefits of any effort, there is no shortcut. I learned to start at the beginning and take every step, avoiding no hill, and persevering through heat, cold, wet – one foot in front of the other, more slowly perhaps than I wanted, to the end.

“. . . Unlike some backpackers who say that they feel a little let down when they aren't on the trail, I [experience] a kind of euphoria from the memory of climbing mountains. This [stays] with me most of the time, as I go about my business in the asphalt-covered world. In [everyday] life, as in mountain life, I try to remember that most achievements progress in tedious increments....

“Thanks to [Leo] Kottke, I understand that the mountains give me time. For [me], at one time a confirmed night owl, to have turned toward the morning – that is a rebirth. Through a guitarist whose music I rediscovered at the dump, I named the philosophy the mountains taught me.... taking the long way home.”¹

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One of my all-time favorite New Yorker cartoons depicts a family of Bedouins journeying across the desert, their camels piled high with all their worldly possessions. The father's camel is in the lead; his wife and children are on camels in a line behind him. The father has turned around to yell at his children, and you know what the caption says, even before you see it, because you've been there, either in the back seat, with a parent turned to speak to you; or perhaps in the driver's seat, turning back to your children: “Stop asking if we're almost there!” But in this case, it's hilarious, and more

1 Christine Woodside, Editor in Chief, “What I Learned from a Leo Kottke Tape found at the Dump,” *Appalachia*, Summer/Fall 2006

than a little Zen, because the Bedouin father is saying, “Stop asking if we're almost there! For g*d's sake, we're *nomads!*”²

The answer to the question, *Are we there yet?* is always, *Yes. There is here.*

That said, there's a lot of *there* that I would prefer not to be. I try not to feel that way, but you know how it is ... in airports and airplanes, or waiting rooms, or long lines; or, worse, sick or in pain; or worst of all, with someone else who's sick or in pain and isn't going to get better. It's inevitable, if you stop to think about it from this vantage point, that the thought arises, “Thank g*d here is not there.” And that's a good spiritual practice, isn't it – to get in touch with *gratitude* that *there* – *there* in one of those less-desirable “*theres*” – is *not* here.

If your *here* is *there*, bless your heart, and far be it from me to imply that a little distraction might not be good for the soul. Let's talk about the power of the imagination. If we find ourselves in one of those anywhere-but-here “heres,” we can swim to the other side on the wave of our imagination. When William Butler Yeats writes, “I shall arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,” I suspect that he wasn't literally hopping up out of his desk chair and setting off to his island sanctuary. More than likely, the poem began in him as a warm thought in the middle of the cold city, standing, as he writes, “on the pavements gray.” He was using the power of his extraordinary imagination to encourage, inspire, or comfort himself. It's beautiful – one of my favorites. Here you go:

The Lake Isle of Innisfree

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honey bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements gray,

² If you know the artist on this cartoon, please let me know! I can't find it anywhere.

I hear it in the deep heart's core.

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Where do you go when you wish *here* were anywhere but here, wish *there* were *here*? Where is your respite, your bottom of the Grand Canyon, your Innisfree, the sanctuary of your imagination?

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Another trick of the imagination, a spiritual practice for turning *here* to *there*, is to learn not to give any energy to the difficult *here*. We can narrow our focus, even to the point that almost our entire experience of the present becomes simply breathing in and breathing out. Breathing in and breathing out. I like this one for places like a rough ride in the dentist's chair, excruciatingly boring lectures, and moments of deep grief.

When a young soldier wrote a letter to Rainer Maria Rilke, pouring out his deepest fears, the poet responded, in part,

“I am touched by your beautiful concern about life.... I feel that there is no one anywhere who can answer for you those questions and feelings which, in their depths, have a life of their own.... But even so, I believe that you will not have to remain without a solution if you trust in Nature, in what is simple in Nature, in the small things that hardly anyone sees and that can so unexpectedly become huge and immeasurable. If you have this love for what is humble, and seek very simply, as one who serves ... then everything will become easier, more coherent, ... not in your intellect, perhaps, ... but in your innermost awareness, awakens, and knowledge. You are so young, so much before all beginning, and I want to beg you, as much as I can, ... to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart, and to try to love the questions themselves.... Don't search for the answers, which cannot be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps, then, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.”³

Are we there yet? The answer is, *Yes. There is here.*

Ram Das' most famous book is called *Be Here Now*. Ironically, it was carted all over the world by enlightenment-seekers everywhere. *Be here now* is a good mantra. *Just do it* is also a good mantra, or, less prosaically, just put one foot in front of the other, breath after breath, as far as possible choosing the next best step, doing the least amount of harm, loving and serving. “After Michelangelo died, someone found in his studio a

3 Rainer Maria Rilke, Letter Four, *Letters to a Young Poet*, 16 July, 1903

piece of paper on which he had written a note to his apprentice, in the handwriting of his old age:

‘Draw, Antonio,
draw, Antonio,
draw and do not waste time.’⁴

Years later, Ram Das wrote another book, understandably spectacularly less successful, entitled *Still Here: Embracing Aging, Changing, and Dying*. And just as he completed that book, he stroked – or, as he says it, he was stroked, as in, by the hand of g*d. It left him with expressive aphasia. About a year later, his friend and colleague, Buddhist meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg, was writing her book on faith. Sharon Salzberg writes, “Haltingly now, a few labored words at a time, [Ram Das] asked me how work on my book ... was going. 'It's really hard,' [she] told him. 'I've never had to go so deep inside myself before.... and bring out the words.' He looked ... at [her softly and said, slowly,] 'That's how . . . I am . . . every day . . . now.’”⁵

Ram Das' golf clubs stand abandoned in a corner of his closet. He cannot drive the sports car parked in his driveway. Living on Maui, he no longer leaves the island. Nonetheless, he has a rich and textured life, a combination of ongoing rehabilitation and writing and teaching – some of it by Skyping-in to conferences, and some of it by the example of his sheer will and perseverance. I have an adorable picture of him with his friend, Lama Surya Das, both in Hawaiian shirts, looking radiant and happy. He is happy. Years of meditation practice and a devotion to the spiritual life enables him to *be here now*, without longing for *here* to be different – without longing for *here* to be *there*.

Beloved spiritual companions,

There is no shortcut. Each of us must take every step.
And even as one journey ends, another is already beginning.

May we show up in the present:
neither ahead of ourselves nor behind.

Breathing in and breathing out,
let us seek to live the questions,
live in the deep heart's core.

4 Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*

5 Sharon Salzberg, *Faith*, p. 90

Are we there yet?
The answer is always, *Yes.*
There is here.