

Return from Exile

Amy Simper

In my approach to life, I experience extreme spirituality as one of the risks of my faith. Faith is lived out as I move between the uncertainty of exile and the clarity I recover in returning home. While in exile I must move more by faith than by sight. Sometimes I choose exile; sometimes it is imposed on me. In the rock climbing, skiing and third world volunteer work I pursue, I choose exile from comfort and safety nets. There are times, however, when I experience exile that is not of my own choosing. It can come through grief, or loss, or sickness.

In the Old Testament, “to repent” means to return home from exile. In the New Testament the Greek root for repentance means “to go beyond the mind that you have been given and acquired.”¹ (set endnote 1, see last paragraph of this article) I find these biblical references helpful points of connection to my own journey from home, to exile and back home again.

Playing in the shallows, I had unexpectedly fallen into deeper waters. Panicked thrashing yielded no reward. I had gone under for the third time. My child-aged brain seemed to understand what came next. Everything then began to move in a calm, slow motion. I remember talking with God and asking, “Is this it?” I had thought there would be more time on earth. Instead, I was comforted by absolute knowledge that I would soon be with God. Swoop! Splash! A stranger’s big hand yanked me from the depth, and he held me in his hairy arms and brought me to shore. That brief moment has proven to be a defining event in my life. At age eight, I knew God. I knew that my Creator had further plans for me because I had been saved from a drowning exile. From this experience I had been given the gift of a personal relationship and extreme trust in God. Though I did not recognize it at the time, I would later discern that it was now my responsibility to use the tools of strong body and mind, given to me, to help myself and others learn to endure, to press beyond limits, to expand known boundaries and to seek new possibilities.

Light! Dark! Light! Dark! Light! Dark! Think thin. Spaces between the trees are narrowing. Thawap, thawap, thawap, thawap! Branches sting my thighs. If I close my eyes the small twigs still whack me in the teeth. Tight turns, open space ahead! Huck the small cliff band. Poof! The 10 inches of powder cut by my skis, is as soft, puffy and clean as a new down comforter. My heartbeat returns to a more reasonable tempo.



Of this day ice-climbing in Ouray, Colorado, Amy recalls: It is cold. I can feel my partner’s shivers through the rope though my fingers are stiff and numb. Just one more pitch—rope length—of climbing left before we can get off this forsaken, windblown rock face. It was sunny four hours ago. I want to throw up, and my head is exploding. There is no immediate escape. Later that evening, snug around the campfire, we recall the day’s events and with excitement make plans to do it again tomorrow. God’s presence smiles among us while we revel in the joy of returning “home.”

To an expert skier, such daring is a welcome challenge. The proficient skier confidently seeks the edge of control in the randomness of the uncharted terrain. It is, however, not a challenge a novice skier would relish. For someone who is just learning to ski, a detour off of the trail is like a death sentence and the guide who imposes such an adventure on a novice is not

deserving of trust. It is an imposed exile in which the beginning skier feels completely out of control.

An escape from an abusive relationship can feel as dangerous as the new skier's treacherous pass through the trees. Just as the skier looks for the scant light of hope between the trees and trusts that safe ground will arise softly underfoot upon landing so is the fear of a woman on the run. Help in regaining one's footing comes in the form of supportive friendships and the understanding that returns from exile, though often difficult, are certainly desired. Evidence of old wounds and bruises may exist. Yet, in practiced spirituality there is the hope of a more secure and peaceful existence well within the boundaries of paths that are tried and true.

It is cold. I can feel my partner's shivers through the rope though my fingers are stiff and numb. Just one more pitch—rope length—of climbing left before we can get off this forsaken, windblown rock face. It was sunny four hours ago. I want to throw up, and my head is exploding. There is no immediate escape. Later that evening, snug around the campfire, we recall the day's events and with excitement make plans to do it again tomorrow. God's presence smiles among us while we revel in the joy of returning "home."

The diagnosis of cancer truly is a form of exile. Once charted, there seems to be no escape. Things will never be the same. Life is interrupted. Choices of treatments are made. The subsequent therapy seems to do more immediate damage than good. One endures. At the end, victory is found in long term or temporary renewal of health, or in the release to a better place. Regardless, throughout the journey there is a precarious dance between a sense of God's abandonment and a sense of lovingly being carried in God's arms. Again, this is practiced spirituality, the return to peace, having come from a place well beyond what was previously known.

Eventually, everyone experiences stages, places and degrees of exile. Regardless of whether exile is chosen or imposed, how one finds the path back home depends on previous experiences and the gift of faith. Living with extreme spirituality takes practice and a growing awareness of God's presence in our lives. One does not arrive at Everest Base Camp in a day. Such a rush to high elevation might kill even the hardest of beings. Instead, one creates little tests, each day moving the limits further out. So it is with spirituality. God provides reassurance and love at just the right time. Yet practice in seeking and walking with God under less difficult

circumstances ingrains familiar patterns of belief, providing more predictable experiences of trust. We find God's answers in whispers, a star in the sky, the comforting hand of a loved one, or a symbolic door ever so slightly ajar. Just in the nick of time, the captured breath, the hidden climbing hold on the blank rock face, the thinnest of spaces between the trees becomes as risk-free as maple syrup on warm pancakes. We make our return from the starvation and discomfort of exile, blessed by creation, graced by love, always with God. It does not take extreme conditions to desire comfort. Through faith, that comfort and restoration are available to all.

Note:

1. This definition of repentance is used with permission, from bulletin writings of Pastor Joseph Holub, Lord of The Mountains Lutheran Church, Dillon, Colorado, March 15, 2009.