

COMING HOME

OASIS MINISTRIES FOR SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT—20th ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION
Words offered by Kent Ira Groff at Kenbrook, Lebanon, Pa., November 21, 2008

I invite you to contemplate images of “home” as you see photos and listen to the Beatles’ sing “The Two of Us” with its refrain: “We’re on our way home... we’re on our way back home.” (Photos over two decades of Oasis Ministries’ life are projected as “The Two of Us” is played.)

I now invite you to share in a word or phrase, images or metaphors that convey “home...”

I.

I will tell a story of home for me. A few years ago a new owner had bought our family farmhouse in southern Chester County, Pennsylvania—the place I called home until I was twenty-four. When my brother died of a tractor accident at age thirty-one in 1971, the farm was sold and the barn was razed to make room for a housing development. But the early 1800s farmhouse was mercifully spared.

As the house passed through four successive owners, I made contact with each new occupant so I (and family members) could visit. Since I lived at a distance, I had tried unsuccessfully to call ahead to make arrangements to visit the new occupants in 2005. I had a few minutes while in the area to visit my cousin and decided to stop and tender my apologies for an impromptu visit.

When the owner came to the door, I told him I had grown up in this house till I was married, and I would like to stop in for just five minutes to see it (or later that day); I was sorry for showing up unannounced but couldn’t make contact. He scowled and said he was recovering from surgery and couldn’t I see that? (He was in his bathrobe at 10A.M.) As he started to close the door and as I turned to leave, I pointed to the classic grapevine porch railing. “You know my brother welded this wrought iron after it was broken by Hurricane Hazel in the 1950s.”

“You mean you used to live here?”

“Well, yes, this was my home till I got married.”

“Oh, please come in! Is your wife in the car? Invite her in, please.” The first thing he showed us was how the grapevine arches on the west were recently damaged by a snowstorm, and, he pointed out, badly repaired with a modern crossbeam. (I think: *The damage in my brother’s story connects with the owner’s recent damage.*) He began taking us through every room of the house. Now he was leading us upstairs where I had not visited since 1971—even showing me the bedroom of my youth.

With eyes moist with gratitude, I mentioned today was our wedding anniversary and he had given us a priceless gift. Handing us his phone number, he said, “You are always welcome.”

That afternoon as we toured the Brandywine River Museum with my cousin and his wife, surveying landscape paintings by three generations of Wyeths, I pondered: what caused the sudden turnaround from rebuke to generosity? Perhaps there was a clue in the Andrew Wyeth quote in the museum brochure: “Truth comes through the side of the eye.”

The turning point seems to lie in my one-sentence personal story of destruction and restoration: “You know my brother welded this wrought iron after it was broken....” Nor does it escape my notice that the “front porch” is an archetype of a liminal space—outside but just ready to enter inside the “house” of one’s life, a likely place for a spiritual homecoming. Home happens in the liminal spaces of our lives. Home happens in the in-between spaces—between the end of a career, or a relationship and the beginning of a new one. The seashore, a mountaintop, sunrise, sunset—those thin places where we predisposed for Spirit transformations.

II.

Now for a few stories of the actual founding of Oasis Ministries. It was about 4 o’clock in the afternoon in January 1988, a liminal month and a liminal time of day, during a year of full-time chaplain training at Hershey Medical Center. I was putting my coat on to go home, when Mike Ebersole, my supervisor, turned and asked, “How would you like to spend a week at Shalem Institute with Tilden Edwards, Gerald May, Rosemary Dougherty on the theme of “The Spiritual Life of Spiritual Leaders?” I thought, *Well, if my supervisor’s inviting me I don’t have to ask permission!* I said, “Sure.” When I got to Shalem I knew that was home. I’ve told this over and over. What did I mean, “that was home?”

Later that year I was having lunch with another chaplain Russell Hobbs—eating creates another liminal space. I began describing my dream of starting a non-profit organization for retreats and spiritual direction. My chaplain colleague asked, “What would you call it?” I paused, and heard myself say, “Oasis!” But I knew in that moment I would never do this alone. I vowed to create a board, for accountability, for creativity, to balance my dreams with reality.

John Killian, a charter board member with a practical attorney’s mind, asked: “Oasis... what!? Oasis Bar? Oasis Spa?” In 1988 there was no Internet, so I called the 1-800 phone directory and asked for anything listed as “Oasis.” All of them were bars or swimming pool companies or spas! So it became “Oasis *Ministries*”—plural—retreats, spiritual direction, and training programs—for “*spiritual development*.” It could have been for “spiritual formation,” but development seemed less formal, more friendly. Just as we have stages of human development, it occurred to us that there are stages of spiritual development. We would welcome people of varied stages and stations of life.

Then came the Oasis *logo*, which I doodled late one night. Roger Gench, SDSG graduate, now a pastor in Washington, D.C., said of that early logo as he led our board retreat: “I’m glad Kent finally got rid of the marijuana plant logo!” We can all thank Mary Pinto, who got the logo re-designed for Program Guide one summer while I was away. The logo, of course, conveys the water hidden beneath the desert ground, three wavy lines representing baptism and three branches of a palm tree representing a subliminal cross and a subliminal trinity—body, mind, spirit; Creator, Christ, Comforter—but also the trinity of experience: times when we’re emptied, times when we’re filled, and the third point—times when we dance back and forth. All is enveloped in an arc—representing the world and representing the sun—but open, incomplete, inviting you too as part of the light of the world. The space represents the kabalistic Jewish idea of *tikkun olam*—to mend the

universe. The arc is incomplete with your part in healing the world.

III.

And now some stories from our common life. I hold a letter from Sanford Alwine, who cannot be here tonight, and who served as co-director of Spiritual Direction for Spiritual Guides. In fact it was Sandy who came up with that title. He writes: “Your telephone call of 1988 inviting me to become part of the Oasis team was life changing. I thank you and I thank God for drawing me into the wonderful work of this organization. It was indeed life changing for me because of the committed community of people coming together: the participants, the staff, the board, and people who contributed financial resources.” For a dozen years Sandy and I met twice a month at the BE (Bob Evans restaurant) to plan SDSG events.

In my struggles I depended on prayers. In early August many years we might have only six of seven enrolled in SDSG. My wife Freddy, who regrets not being here and who served as treasurer for over a decade, reminded me I often cried in early August. I would say, “It isn’t fair to the staff; I don’t know whether to tell them I need them or not!” I would pray this way (hands folded pointed Godward), and then I would pray this way (hands outstretched to people—as if dialing a telephone), by getting board members involved, calling anyone who expressed the least interest. We always had enough people, sometimes persons who stretched our mold.

Financial burdens would be answered in surprising homecomings. One couple gave a scholarship for another SDSG member who traveled from upstate, New York! An SDSG member worked in GM rug factory... at end of SDSG Year I the group quietly took up offering to completely cover her scholarship for Year II.

A homing phone call came one day in the early 1990s from a young Church of the Brethren pastor in State College. He was enrolled in Shalem Institute and needed to find a Peer Group. It so happens we had just started Year II, just a single afternoon, and that is the small step that started Glen Mitchell on his homing path to become the Director of Program for Oasis Ministries.

In 1998 a clearness committee and I discerned that after a decade the director needed a sabbatical in the first half of 1999—so I made plans to go to India. My need for a liminal space created another homing for Oasis. I still recall board president Harry Royer’s question for discernment: “Kent, as you imagine yourself flying out over the Atlantic in January, which of the candidates can you imagine looking down on in the office with the most confidence?” I said, “Mary Pinto,” and that was the homecoming of the first administrative assistant. Fast forward ten years I can tell you as I flew in from Denver Thursday I looked down in my imagination with confidence and saw a most talented administrative assistant Betsy Keller and wonderfully gifted director Cindy Garis!

People would say to me, “I don’t see how you do all you do.” My standard response was, “Oh, I don’t!” That meant three things: first, some things don’t get done! Second, *I* don’t do it—we have a board and staff; I wasn’t alone; third, *I* don’t—Spirit does, God. So I prayerfully name all the staff in addition to those already mentioned:

Emily Wallace, Prue Yelinek, Bryer Helmer, Roger Gench, Nancy Bieber, Tracey

Marx, Bonita Rose Collins Hobbs, Linda Helmus, Laura Howell, Marc Oehler, Ruth Zeiders, Jo Ann Kunz, Hugh Smith, Ruth Workman, Melissa Stock, Linda Klopp, Kathleen Rooney.

Each came to us in some liminal time—in the between times—each entered the door of Oasis Ministries, and each has beckoned some of you through that door.

IV.

Home happens in the liminal spaces of our lives. The word liminal comes from the Latin *limen*, meaning threshold—a doorway. What are the “front porches” or “the back porches” of the house of your life? What are the doorways of your life? What title would you give the doorway to your childhood? What would you name the threshold from childhood to adolescence? From adolescence to young adulthood? To adulthood? More important, I invite you now to ask, what threshold am I entering now?—what title would you give to the doorway in this chapter of your life?