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Roads Disappear & Words Change

I had a strange dream last night. (Aren't all dreams strange?) I was confidently driving home on the Interstate Highway, gliding along, deep in my comfort zone when I felt a bump and discovered that I was in midst of a field of soy beans. For no reason, I suddenly found myself in the field.

What to do? I clearly had to get back onto the highway so I looked around to find my way back only to discover that there were no highways to be found! The way home had disappeared — and I startled myself awake.

It's almost a parable. It's a question without an answer. What to do when the well known, well traveled, highly effective road disappears?

I'm 73 and I can tell you that nearly every retired person I know is fully aware of the question. Pathways, habits, practices, routines that have been followed for 40 or more years suddenly disappear and, in retirement, we are required to invent something new. In some measure, we are required to reinvent ourselves. We are in a field without roads, and something new has to happen. It would hardly seem fair, but it turns out to be mostly fun.

Another story. I spent some of my growing-up years in the rural south. The linguistic custom of my little town was to practice the fine art of understatement. We saved the superlatives for church. So when we had Sunday dinner, perhaps the finest fried chicken that ever crossed one's lips and tongue, and somebody asked, "How was it?", we answered, with a slow and measured drawl, "Not bad, not bad at all." Translation: That was the finest thing that I have ever tasted.

Note the contrast. Not long ago I visited my dental hygienist, a delightful young woman, who asked me to turn a bit towards her and open wider. I complied, and she said, "Awesome!" Awesome? In a burger restaurant recently, I ordered a hamburger with cheese, mustard and pickles, and the guy behind the counter said, "Awesome!" Awesome? To this old guy, opening your mouth and ordering a hamburger are not awesome events.

Even worse, I was asked how the burger was, and I slipped into my old argot and said, "Not bad, not bad at all," and the poor guy acted as if he had been insulted. I did not say "Awesome."

In the third grade in another small town school, a teacher spent what felt like an eternity teaching me to say, "Ma'am." I learned, somewhat painfully, that every female from birth to death could and often should be addressed as, "Ma'am." It was a matter of common respect. Imagine my reaction when I read in a paper last week that an elementary student had addressed his teacher as, "Ma'am," and was punished for it. He had to write, "Ma'am" on a piece of paper a whole bunch of times. She doesn't like the word! He is being respectful, and she does not like that form of respect. What happened?

Old roads disappear. Language changes. Familiar phrases fail to communicate. We find ourselves feeling like strangers in our own place, and we do not much like it. I still prefer understatement and “Ma’am.” Which is okay until I realize that my language does not communicate well with my own children and grandchildren.

It is like I’m sitting in a field, and I don’t have ready road to them unless I am ready to do something different, The question is, “What am I willing to do, what new language will I learn to speak, to try to connect with generations who do not communicate as I?” I could demand that they learn my language, but we all know how well that will work.

To connect with our grandchildren and their peers, we may have to travel a new way and learn a new language. It’s the issue every grandparent confronts and every church needs to engage.

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