

“A Map Home to Yourself”

St. Joseph’s Chapel

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There are certain authors whose voice can carry the reader comfortably into many and varied arenas of thought: into science and religion, without losing the authentic sound of each; into psychology and mysticism<sup>i</sup>, without changing the tone or pitch of one or the other, allowing them to resonate, play off each other.

Dava Sobel is such an author. Her book *Longitude* is worth your time reading. In *Longitude*, she brings us into step with John Harrison whom she describes as “the lone genius who solves the trickiest scientific problem of his time”<sup>ii</sup> by giving measurement to the matter of knowing where you are, when you have no reference for where you are. To fix your location you need points of reference. Before John Harrison, sailors were lost as soon as they lost sight of land in open sea; there was no accurate means of measuring how far west they traveled out across empty, open water. In 1492, Columbus ... wandered; his voyaging was done by dead reckoning and the stars, mostly guesswork. Not until 1765 could longitude be navigated with any measure of certainty.

Of course, today, we can all cheat and just ask *Hey Siri, where am I?* We can navigate by satellites and know our exact latitude and longitude wherever we go. Back in the later dark ages of the 1980s one consulted Rand of tribe McNally to sort out where they were and where they

wanted to go. Books of maps described territory in order to find cities, streets, addresses. Every page had references where the map was continued, to the north, south, east and west, the edge of one page matched with another. Every city, every state had a map; it was impossible to be totally, completely lost.

But it is more fun to go way back in time and look at old maps, truly medieval maps of the world when the world was all and only Mesopotamia or Europe. These old maps are instructive precisely because they are distorted. They have edges. Boundaries beyond which was only ‘the unknown.’ In European 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century maps it is common for those edges to be descriptively annotated “*Here Be Dragons*”. At the edges of experience is always where we place the idea of a dragon: something frightening, something dangerous, something of which to be afraid—but we do not need to do this. Keep the dragons at the edge of the map, if you will, but don’t treat them as the Europeans imagined the archetype; rather, treat the dragons as China and Asia see dragons: something grand, awe-inspiring combining awe-ful with awe-some and therefore to be respected, but ultimately to be befriended. That is, the unknown need not be feared, but embraced.<sup>iii</sup>

I’m thinking and meditating on maps because this is my metaphor for prayer. A prayer is a map. It is an image of how to get from where you are to where you want to be or—where you need to be. We recite the Lord’s Prayer<sup>iv</sup> every time we meet in chapel: listen to it creatively, as if it were a map. Like a sailor out of sight of land, in need of orientation, the prayer sets our line of sight on God: Our Father, who is in Heaven/ God, our father, whose name is hallowed, that is whose name is sacred. The map reads: there is a God. We can’t see God and we acknowledge that, hallowed, sacred, maybe God is beyond our ability to imagine? Read the map like this: you who are lost, there is a lighthouse; you can’t see it yet, but it’s out there.

Consult the map again: *Give us our daily bread*. Meaning: focus on right now, on today. You need to eat. There are certain things we all need: a place to sleep; to *actually sleep* as much as we need in that place; a place where we are safe, safe to be ourselves. We need to actually eat but we need also to be *nourished*, by friends, by family, knowing we are loved and worthy of being loved; loving ourselves, capable of loving others. The more we love the more it flows back to us but don't neglect the fact that, to be able to love others, you need to take care of, nourish, love, yourself.

Next, our map reads: *forgive us, just as we forgive others*. From feeling lost we move to being assured there is a safe harbor and a lighthouse; we are told to be calm, focus on the moment, be nourished; and now we are reminded we are not alone, we live in relation to others. The way to relate to others is simple: be forgiving. Slow to anger, quick to compassion. Let our confusions seek understanding, our hurts, reconciliation. The better we are at forgiving, the more we will be forgiven. Don't blame. Don't judge. Love is unconditional. It's a shame that we have only one word in English (Greek has four!) for such a huge concept as love, but love is not only romantic; love is work; love is a decision to put others first and help them find their safe harbor, too. Black white gay straight queer democrat socialist republican Rastafarian pastafarian<sup>v</sup>—everyone deserves love. Love is forgiveness, most especially when you're tired, when you're short tempered; remember to forgive the other person instead of snipe at them and you, in turn, will be forgiven for all your trespasses. As much as you are capable of being a forgiving person, you are worthy of being forgiven.

And last: *Deliver us from evil for yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory*. So, now, where are we? Where has our map delivered us? We are on our way to the place that is the only place that makes sense. It is our job<sup>vi</sup> to become who we are, marvelously made as we are.

And that is where this prayer map leaves us: honestly ourselves, in the world as it is, not as we wish it would be. In need of being delivered from evil, but in the midst of evil, in the midst of stress, of hardship, of heartbreak, we are in the only place we could be and exactly where we need to be: in the kingdom of god, *because it is always already right here*, wherever we are *loving*, whenever we are *forgiving*, right in the middle of others *needing nourishment, nourishing one another*. And there is a dignity to be a human in need of being delivered from evil and from darkness; a dignity in our very limitation and powerlessness that is touched with glory and imbued with power precisely because we belong to God.

Abraham Joshua Heschel<sup>vii</sup> suggests that we pray not to ask God to do everything for us, not to ask God to rescue us from the struggle and not even to redeem us, but to make ourselves worthy of God, to make ourselves worthy of redemption, to imbue our struggles with honor and dignity. We pray, we consult our map, in order to make our way across the sea, through life, through the vastness of human experience, through every day of school.

This is not the only map. An author who had a profound effect upon my life as a scholar is the Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel, who only recently passed away. In a novel called *The Town Beyond the Wall*, Wiesel says this about prayer:

Every [person] has a prayer that belongs to him [or her], as he [or she] has a soul that belongs to him. And just as it is difficult to for a [person] to find his [or her] soul, so it is difficult to find [their] prayer. Most people live with souls, and say prayers, that are not their own.<sup>viii</sup>

“Most people live with souls and say prayers that are not their own.” This is why it is important for everyone to realize that it is their job to become who they are; to discover

who they are; to discover their own personal myth; to square off against their dragons and say *this is who I am*. And as it is our job to become who we are, we need our own maps.

A Map home to yourself.

What is your prayer? Your prayer is your map is, in other words, your goal.

What are your goals and how do you see them from the vantage point of this day, today, right now? Do you have nourishment to get through the day, the week, exams, the end of the year and if you're saying, no, I don't feel nourished—I want to know. If you are not feeling nourished, your chaplains want to know. Our school doctor, your teachers, dorm parents, counselors and friends want to know.

What is your prayer? What are your goals? Choose a small goal for today.

Choose something with a little more sustenance for March, and set your sights on something impossible, unreasonably beautiful and optimistic, for the rest of your life. Find your prayer for the last day of winter term classes and for exam week; find your prayer for March break, and for the start of spring.

We say prayers every time we meet here in Chapel—find your prayer and recite it any time you lose sight of your safe harbor. Find your prayer and you will find a map home to yourself.

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<sup>i</sup> I have in mind of course the writing of Carl G. Jung whom my Dreams students have read this past term; also James Hillman, *The Soul's Code* and *The Force of Character*; David L Miller, *The New Polytheism* and *Hells and Holy Ghosts*.

<sup>ii</sup> Dava Sobel, *Longitude*, Walker and Company, 1995. She is also the author of *Galileo's Daughter* and *The Glass Ceiling*.

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<sup>iii</sup> I am reminded how Shakespeare expressed the great uncertain unknown which lies ever ahead of us, the future, as “the undiscovered country.” The future is just off the edge of our map: do we seek to embrace it, or turn our back to it anxiously?

<sup>iv</sup> The prayer as we recite it is longer than what is found in the Gospels, Matthew 6:5-15 and Luke 11:1-4.

<sup>v</sup> What’s a pastafarian, you ask? A bit of graduate school silliness pressuring the concept of the divine, intending on challenging fundamentalism and apparently advocating atheism. Or—a teenager who declares themselves to be vegetarian but who does not actually eat any vegetables and prefers to live off of pasta.

<sup>vi</sup> So says Søren Kierkegaard, whom Fourth Formers have read in their sections of Theology I.

<sup>vii</sup> This sentiment can be found in Heschel’s *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, edited by Susannah Heschel, New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1997, xxv. Heschel writes, “Prayer may not save us. But prayer may make us worthy of being saved.”

<sup>viii</sup> Elie Wiesel, *The Town Beyond the Wall*, New York, Schocken Press, 1964.