

The traveling life

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [April 12, 2000](#) issue

Reviewing Jonathan Raban's *Passage to Juneau: A Sea and Its Meanings* (Pantheon) in the *New York Review of Books* (January 20), Larry McMurtry concentrates on the act of saying good-bye. Raban, a skilled writer of travelogues and an adventurous traveler, tells his three-and-a-half-year-old daughter Julia that he is leaving for 21 days. He reflects that to Julia it "could as well be 21 eternities"—words that will ring in the ears and sting the consciences of many who travel frequently, leaving their families behind.

"Traveling always entails infidelity. You do your best to mask the feeling of sly triumph that comes with turning your back on home and all it stands for; but disappearing into the crowd in the departure lounge, or stowing your bags in the car at dawn, you know you're a rat. I was an experienced deserter, but never until now had I been squarely faced with my treachery," Raban writes.

Then he looks at Julia: "The colors in Julia's face had run together. Lower lip thrust forward, eyes brimming, she stared down into the carpeted green depths of the stairwell; she seemed suffused with her own powerlessness. She didn't have a vote on this, and at three and a half, she had no idea how to gain suffrage."

Raban responds by having Julia and her mother join him on a part of his trip. But many travelers do not have that choice. Listen to flight attendants far from home talking about the pain of leaving a child behind. Read the faces of the people bent over their laptops in flight, or look at them telling jokes and watching the last innings on television in the bar of a hotel far from home. They and their families may well be feeling "suffused with their own powerlessness."

I've had such moments in a life marked by much travel. Cherished on my bookshelves are two signs made by my sons, who hammered the letters with a nail into two white boards: "Welcome Home Dad!" and "Nice to Have You Back!" Fortunately, in those days when they were young, parish meetings at first and then a fanatic devotion to classroom schedules gave structure to my weeks and made travels of more than two days rare.

Now with those schedules gone, I find that it is taking me longer than I thought it would to get off boards and commissions and to end consultancies, and harder to resist taking on new ones. Rather than succumb to guilt or lapse into nostalgia, I do what all those other people whose work takes them on the road do: look for interpretations that will lighten things.

I found mine years ago at the Martin Marty Mission in South Dakota. (Named for Martin Marty, O.S.B., not for the Martin Marty whose name might be followed by those initials in scrambled order.) An oblate there said I should have been called *Ti-kdi-sni*, which in the Dakota language means “Never Stays Home.” The Sioux applied it to a beloved priest, Father Sylvester Eisenman. He had to travel because it was his mission. People like me who would just as soon not head for another airport or roost in another motel comfort ourselves by saying that traveling is part of our vocation.

This is not a plea for sympathy. Now in my second retirement, in a year I had intended to use as “the first sabbatical in my life,” I find that making and keeping vocational commitments is my own doing. One of these years I am going to have the Dakota Sioux rename me “Sometimes Stays Home.” But, like so many others, I don’t have too much time to reflect on that future. Gotta catch a plane.