

What you learn going back to your roots

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I was just 17 when we moved away from the farm where I grew up. Funny how things change with the perspective of a lifetime. I thought I was old, that I would always consider myself an Indiana farm girl.

I couldn't imagine living in one place longer than where I had spent my first 17 years. The farm and Indiana were part of who I was. There were holy places on the farm—thin places I would call them now—where I felt incredibly close to God and where I would talk things out with my Creator in the days of my youth—yell at God when I was mad and cry when I was happy or sad.

I'm glad we moved off the farm but there were years when I yearned to go back to the roots which formed me—not just to visit, but to live. I think that's because for 17 years I had lived in one place. I loved it without question or imagining it would ever change. Our family was happy (yes, we had problems but worked through them) and the farm was just part of who I was.

Then I went through a period where I changed locations or residences every year for eight years: the late teen and young adult years. While I loved the adventures, something in me missed that beauty of belonging somewhere so intimately that the land, the buildings, and the trees were almost part of my DNA.

Our farm was first sold to a bachelor who later married my first cousin, so we had a tie allowing us to go back, visit, walk through the old house, remember.

My cousin's husband then sold the farm to an Amish family. We have also come to know them a bit—initiated first by my father, who would occasionally stop to chat—he loved to roll out his rusty Pennsylvania Dutch (switching to English as needed), and I think both the farmer and my Dad enjoyed those visits.

Now we encroach on this Amish family on special occasions, asking if we can visit: when my father died in 2006, the farm was where we wanted to go after the graveside service. More recently, on the day before my mother's 90th birthday, the

farm was where my brother and his family especially wanted to go, a sort of pilgrimage for his son and his wife and their two little girls, who had never been there. The rest of us were only too happy to oblige. Indeed, the farm and land is a holy place for all of us where roots were put down deep and wide.

This time I was stunned to realize this farmer had owned the land longer than Dad had ever owned it, about 28 years to Dad's 23; he was clearly busy but he recognized us immediately and paused to chat and catch up a bit; his wife and several daughters were gone for the day working with other women making preparations for a September wedding. He had had to sell off more of the land—that was hard, he said—the home place now down to some 30 acres from the original 128 we owned, bordered on all sides by lovely modern suburban type homes on large lots. The farmer was mainly raising cows and corn from what we could see. He welcomed us to walk around as we wished, but we did not ask to go in the house. Happily we went to the barn, laced with the familiar smells but more profoundly, memories.

Oh the barn. The silo now gone (the farmer said the extra yearly taxes were too much for something they were no longer using)—we walked up the barn hill which seemed so huge when we were little, now little more than a small rise. Inside it was mostly filled with hay and straw. The granary was still there, the sheep shed still attached, the bunker silo still in use, a square hole for throwing hay down to the floor beneath still gaping and dangerous for the little ones in our midst.

But the rungs of the hay mow ladders were what reached out to me this visit, the same rungs we climbed as kids, still sturdy as you could ever want. I put my hand snug around those rungs and felt 17 again: young and strong and ready to find my own life and love.

Which I did. And they were all there with me now visiting my roots: husband, three daughters, two sons-in-law, two grandsons. How rich, how connected, how overwhelmed with joy and gratefulness I felt. There is something about the land, something about the house where you grew up that calls you back, catches you, but lets you go—happily back to your current life and chosen path, at least if you are happy in it. I no longer pine to go back to age 17 or that Indiana soil. But touching the past, we somehow feel more whole. More content perhaps, to know and remember all that has gone before: the thin places, the rough places, and the high points. It helps you trust that your Creator is still with you, no matter where you

land.

Thanks always to the farmer and family who steward the land that none of us ever really owns—we just take care of it for a season. As many ancient native proverbs go: “Treat the earth well: it was not given to you by your parents, it was loaned to you by your children.”

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