

The sacred art of departing

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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“You know, in Germany there are hordes of young Syrian men raping German women.” The statement hovered in the air menacingly. I suspected that I was in for an interesting encounter as I watched him stride determinedly toward me after I gave a presentation on the Syrian refugee crisis, and how a group I'm part of has sponsored two families now living in our town in Canada, at a local church recently. His jaw was set and his brow was furrowed.

I was not expecting congratulations or affirmation for the work that I had spent the last half hour or so describing, but I wasn't expecting anything quite this stark either. It wasn't a question or even a potential opening to a conversation. It was a crude challenge thrown down. Or a dare. Or a provocation. *You have all your nice words about Jesus and love and welcoming the stranger. ... Well, what do you say about this?!*

Not much, as it turned out. I inquired about his sources. (He wasn't sure—he had “read it somewhere.”) I assumed he was talking about [recent events in Cologne](#), so I tried to explain a bit about the differences between the European and Canadian situations, talked about screening processes, and about some of the differences in demographics here in Canada. There was much more that I could should have said. But I didn't. I was tired and not really looking for a battle. He mumbled something about needing to go and that was the last I saw of him.

A few years ago, I attended a series of lectures at Regent College by the famous OT scholar Walter Brueggemann. In speaking about the people of Israel's dramatic exodus from Egypt and the long, complex story that followed, Brueggemann said this:

The life of faith is, in many ways, about “learning the sacred art of departing.” It is about learning how to leave the dominant narratives of our culture.

This phrase has stuck with me ever since as a powerful description of what the life of faith is: *the sacred art of departing*.

For Israel, “the sacred art of departing” meant leaving the story of Egypt—a story of oppression and injustice and slavery and dehumanizing conditions and idolatry—and following God into the future. It meant learning how to live according to a *new story*—learning how to trust and live in community, how to resist the lure of idolatry in all its forms, how to worship, what it meant to be a “blessing to the nations.”

Of course, this sacred departing didn’t always go very well. Israel struggled and sinned and longed for the imagined security and relative comfort of Egypt. They had short memories, as so many of us do, when God places us in challenging circumstances. They chafed under their leaders and complained against God. They *constantly* wandered off after other gods. They were forced to wander in the desert for 40 years and, many years later when they were in the land, they suffered exile at the hands of a variety of foreign empires. Israel struggled with the sacred art of departing—they could never fully leave or resist the temptations of other stories, other homes.

I wonder often about the dominant narratives that require our departure today. There are many, no doubt, ranging from the global to the personal. But it seems to me that the narrative of fearful, suspicious, divisive wall building and maintaining that gets so much play these days ought to be at or near the top of the list. Particularly for those of us who claim to follow Jesus of Nazareth, the one who made an uncomfortable habit of shamelessly crossing boundaries, the one whose life and teaching and death and resurrection liberated us from cherished categories of us/them, clean/unclean, insider/outsider. The one who stubbornly rehearsed the refrain, *Do not be afraid*.

The sacred art of departing from tempting and easy narratives of fear involves willfully choosing to look and listen differently. It is to *choose* to be open to more hopeful narratives. It is to *expect* to find ourselves in different stories when we live as Jesus taught us to: generously, peaceably, selflessly. With arms open—even if tremulously—rather than folded in determined distrust. It is to decide *in advance* that some stories are only good for leaving.

So, maybe I should have tried to tell a different story to the man with the determined stride and the furrowed brow. Maybe I should have talked about the

things that God drops you in the middle of when you try, however fitfully and inconsistently, to practice the sacred art of departing. Maybe I should have said something like,

Hmm, well, can I tell you what I have seen here in our community as we have tried to open our arms and our doors? I have seen Muslims and Christians and people of no professed faith coming together. I have seen them sharing food and sharing their lives. I have seen them splashing in swimming pools and shopping together. I have seen Muslim Syrians welcoming Christian Syrians at the airport and the favor being gratefully returned. I have seen kitchens full of food with hordes of children running around laughing with each other. I have seen people sitting around tables in giggling confusion as a flurry of Arabic and English criss-crosses mid-air. I have seen lots and lots of smiling. I have seen friendships forming. I have seen that simple things like kindness and curiosity and openness can go a very long way. I have seen the goodness of God.

I don't know what the man would have said if I had shared some of this. Perhaps he would still have gone off mumbling. But at the very least, I might have given him something else to think about the next time he "reads something somewhere."

I am not naïve. I know that there are uninspiring, frightening narratives out there. I know that the decision to be open is not always met with wonderful Facebook-able vignettes and stories that sound good in a blog post. I know that love is not always reciprocated and that there will never be an absence of ugly stories for those looking for evidence to support the privileging of fear and the fortification of boundaries. There's a reason that dominant narratives are, well, *dominant*.

But it seems to me that if I am going to do anything more than pay lip service to following the man from Galilee, I have to at least be *open* to encountering and participating in better stories. I have to at least be *open* to leaving some narratives behind and walking toward others because I am convinced that God's future has the right to make demands on our present. I have to trust that love and kindness and generosity and taking the risks that come with crossing boundaries are worth the effort because they go along with the story that God is guiding the world towards.

And I have to *keep on* being open and trusting and fearfully taking steps away from fear, even when this keeping on isn't rewarded. Even when these efforts are

disregarded or abused or ignored. I have to do this because of my deep conviction that if our departures are in the direction of Jesus and his way in the world, they will always be a sacred and desperately necessary art.

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