

Wandering Woman

I Summer Storms

Chapter One

Monsters on the Bus

Lexington, Kentucky, June 4, 2012

Putting things in perspective becomes the agenda for today's meeting with Steve. I'm not usually a paranoid person, but since facing the fact that I need a place to go I've felt a dense fog hovering as it obscures the unknowns in my life. With time to think, and with the help of an objective listener with whom to share my thoughts, that fog is beginning to clear so I can view my possibilities at a safer distance.

Steve is my objective listener whom I met in a book discussion group many years ago. Our group consisted of members of the Catholic, Baptist and Lutheran faiths, five of whom were male and two female. The facilitator of this group served as a personal spiritual mentor for all seven of us participants. Steve was the one psychologist in the group.

We were a diverse group that shared opinions openly and compassionately, respecting the one speaking by not interrupting, as we discussed "Say to this Mountain: Mark's Story of Discipleship", a "team-authored" version of Ched Myers' monumental study of the Gospel of Mark. Myers is a biblical scholar who supports peace and justice work and radical discipleship. At various points in the book, one of us would say, "Well, I threw the book across the floor on THAT interpretation!" Overall, the book enlivened our hearts and engaged our minds for the work of social transformation.

Steve and I now meet regularly. I count on him to express and deal with facts or conditions as perceived without distortion by personal prejudices. If he offers an idea that doesn't ring true for me, I tell him to throw it across the room!

I share with Steve my excitement at facing a new episode in my life. My spirit likes an occasional adventure; it instills enthusiasm and energy into my being. I like change; I like to meet new people and experience different environments. To me, newness means freshness and creative beginnings, as I experienced on my last escapade when I sold my house and moved to Chicago.

Having grown up in Cleveland, close enough to walk to Lake Erie, I thought Chicago would be comparable. I obviously did not do my homework. Chicago is the third largest city in the USA whereas Cleveland ranks forty-fifth!

Growing up in Cleveland I rode public transportation to school and elsewhere; I lived in a diverse European ethnic part of town that housed Italians, Slovenians, Bohemians, Croatians, Hungarians, and so forth; and I swam in a Great Lake that looked like the ocean.

In spite of the largeness of Chicago, I got around without a problem and enjoyed my two-year stay. I learned how and where to catch the “el”; I lived in a Polish neighborhood at the southern edge of Cook County; and I spent many days and evenings gazing at Lake Michigan.

I recall the first time I rode the “el” by myself. I was heading toward the loop for an interview with the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless which required having to transfer once from the Orange Line to the Red Line. When I reached my stop and departed from the train, I stood on the platform taking in my surroundings. When I spotted the Shedd Aquarium, I knew exactly where I was! That’s when I realized that Chicago was my new home.

Now that I’m ten years older, my unknown future fosters worry which propels my spirit into a downward spiral that takes on a life of its own. I think, *“You are older now and should be settling down, enjoying your retired life instead of moving around so much.”* Or, *“You can’t afford to pay high rent, for Pete’s sake!”* And, probably one of the biggies, *“You shouldn’t be living alone; what if something happens to you?”* My worry evolves into fear. That brings up what I don’t want to feel—the fear of being all alone, left behind, vulnerable. I feel that life goes on for others while I’m stuck with the “monsters on the bus” who badger me with accusations.

Steve shares the image of these monsters and compares them to unwanted thoughts and feelings. He explains it as such:

Imagine you are a bus driver with a bus headed in a valued direction in your life. However, a bunch of really scary passengers gets on the bus. They are thoughts, feelings, bodily states, memories—all the ones that you really don't want. They are big, ugly, smelly, and scary. You make a deal with them. You don't want to see or hear them, but you tell them if they sit quietly and don't bother you, you will drive the bus where they want to go. At some point, you may decide to throw them off the bus, but notice when you do that, your bus isn't going anywhere. It turns out that they are strong and you can't

get them off. So you go back to placating them. Whenever they say “Turn left!” you turn. The trouble is that your bus is not going where you want it to go.

The only reason they have control over you is because you don't want to see or hear them. But the fact is they can't harm you. They say they can; your mind tells you they can; but they cannot. They are just words. Maybe—consider the possibility—all the effort you put into controlling these critters isn't needed. You can let them come on up and you can drive your bus wherever you choose to go.

The key question is, “Are you willing to do what would work to enhance your life and to have whatever thoughts, feelings, or memories arise as you do it?” Willingness is not the same as wanting. A person may not want to do something they have said they would do. They can do it nonetheless.

I feel confident that these monsters have jumped onto my adult children's buses as well, causing them concerns and fears regarding their mother's future and their roles in it. They had similar hesitations when I made that move to Chicago. I recall my son telling me to be careful and not talk to strangers. What a role reversal!

In Chicago I worked with formerly homeless women with children who found homes in abandoned apartment buildings that had been renovated. The location was a drug-infested area of Washington Park. My safety was their concern then. Their concerns today are about which is the better place for me to live, can I afford it, or, if I cannot afford it—or worse yet, if I run out of money—will I have to move in with them. We are all in this transition together, working our way through it with our unique characteristics.

As for me, I cannot be rushed. I need time to process, to look at all angles. I must sit with an idea and see how it feels, if it fits or if there are stumbling blocks on its path. It took me an interminable amount of time to decide to publish my writing. I saw plenty of stumbling blocks along the way, and I made up some just to keep me from going forward into the unknown because I was afraid. I felt incompetent and unqualified. Sounds like monsters on the bus, doesn't it?

To understand myself better, I turn to the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator test (MBTI). I took this while a student in a ministry formation program. The purpose of the MBTI personality

inventory is to make the theory of psychological types described by C. G. Jung understandable and useful in people's lives. The questionnaire is designed to measure psychological preferences in how people perceive the world and make decisions.

According to my results, I am idealistic, loyal to my values and to people who are important to me. I am a perceiver, one who finds it difficult to make closure and prefers to keep decisions open. On the other spectrum is the judger, one who likes to have matters settled and thrives on closure. The idea of knowing your preferences does not mean you have a license to say, "Oh, that's just the way I am" when you don't want to change. Rather, it gives you the opportunity to use your least preferred nature, which for me is the judger. And so, I am in that position now, to quit dilly-dallying around and start making decisions.

Age is another factor, if not the main contributor to how we each approach life and its transitions. My intent is to live and operate in the present moment—at peace with all that is around me. I lived a busy life, raised a family while working, and took care of everyone's needs, but now I can make other choices. When I feel rushed or especially pushed into making a decision, I am not in my preferred mode of operation, not at peace; rather, that is when lack of self worth boards my bus.

All of this internal angst is part of an emotional process that accompanied me through life. Childhood was scary, having to feel these emotions without someone with whom I could share them. My fear was perpetuated by spontaneous angry outbursts and imposed intentional scare tactics that made me cry. The fear was so exceedingly heavy at one point that I wet my pants. A graceful gazelle that experiences such fear of being attacked by a lion would dump and run to escape; I was unable to run.

Such a pattern arises in times of stress even to this day. The voices of those monsters begin to penetrate my thoughts that in turn cause emotions to run rampant. It is a vicious circle that becomes a trap; breaking that cycle is the key to freedom. Once I recognize stress and my innate reaction to it, I am aware that these are only the monsters trying to lead me back to where I began as a terrified child who didn't know how to befriend her emotions. Steve guides me into observing the stressful situation from afar, and having done so with detachment, peace, trust and hope return. I feel my internal world settle and I regain confidence to drive on.

Once again I am back in the driver's seat on the bus. The monsters still board the bus at certain intersections of life, but now I understand how to greet them with curiosity and compassion. Those monsters can call me names, tell me how to operate the bus and where to go; however, I know that I am in control of this bus.

Now, I can embrace my coming adventure in the spirit of Dr. Seuss, who wrote: "*Oh the places you'll go! There is fun to be done!*"