

Gifts of the Dark Wood
Part 5: The Gift of Disappearing
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Pass-A-Grille Beach Community Church
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Scripture: Mark 5:25-34

I. The Art of Disappearing

In a poem fit for St. Patrick's Day named, *Tobar Phadraic*, Gaelic for "Patrick's Well," poet David Whyte admonishes us to do something unusual:

*Turn sideways into the light as they say
the old ones did and disappear into the originality
of it all. Be impatient with explanations
and discipline the mind not to begin
questions it cannot answer.*

As Whyte explains it, the concept of turning sideways into the light is a reference to a mythological people called the *Tuatha Dé Danann* in Irish lore. These were small, gentle, yet immensely magical people who lived in Ireland prior to human settlement. They're probably precursors to the Irish Leprechaun. Legend says that when humans arrived, the *Tuatha Dé Danann* found human ways crude and violent. Rather than oppose humans, instead they simply "turned sideways into the light and disappeared," seeking to live in freedom elsewhere.

Whyte draws from this mythology to advise readers against yielding to any force that would impose upon us an identity that is too restrictive. Don't wait around for justifications or explanations; just disappear before that image or identity casts a spell on you, and you succumb to living into one that is too small to live freely within.

Have you ever wished you could simply "turn sideways into the light and disappear"? You're working in the kitchen early one morning making a bit too much noise. Your groggy spouse suddenly appears in the doorway. The expression on your spouse's face tells you that you'd best "turn into the light and disappear" – at least until noon.

Yet, it's not solely others' reactions to our blunders that confine us. Author and humorist Anne Lamott speaks of a persistent internal monologue she dubs, Radio KFKD, that broadcasts a relentless dichotomy of self-praise and self-deprecation.

"How wonderful, how talented, how brilliant you are!"

"How talentless, how worthless, how big a disappointment you are!"

Does Radio KFKD ever stream in *your* head? There's almost no way to shut the darned station off without heavy medication or a full-frontal lobotomy, neither of which are recommended by our brain's Original Manufacturer.

What makes this inner station so insidious is that, if you listen very long to either channel – the one that builds you up or the one that tears you down – both will create a story about you that is far too small to live inside, like an osprey in a cage.

You'd think that the self-aggrandizing channel would do the opposite. "*Live large!*" it says. "*You're the cat's meow, the bee's knees, the cream of the crop! Since you've got it, flaunt it!*"

Yet, the moment you don't actually match this inflated description, the opposite voice will be glad to tell you what you "really" are: "*A hopeless egotist! A hypocrite! If you're the cream of the crop, then the cream has curdled and the crop has failed!*"

No, whether inflating our ego or pushing us into a mire of shame, both of Radio KFKD's channels will create a story that is too small for us to live within.

One of the things I love most about Jesus is that he is always helping people, and entire communities, tell more expansive stories about themselves and others, without being self-aggrandizing. Take our passage this morning, for instance, of the woman who had been plagued by constant hemorrhages, who touches Jesus' garment seeking healing and is actually healed. When Jesus perceived that power had come from him, he could have simply taken mental note of the healing and moved on. After all, the woman was doing everything she could to remain anonymous – approaching Jesus from behind, then merely touching his outer garment before disappearing back into the crowd.

This woman had every reason to remain anonymous. According to Jewish law, outlined in the Levitical purity codes, a person suffering from menstrual bleeding or other bodily discharges are rendered "ceremonially unclean." This means not only that she is forbidden from entering the Temple or participating in a wide variety of religious rituals and social interactions, but anyone who touches her – or is touched by her – is similarly restricted. So, when people discover that she has touched Jesus, everyone would have been outraged by her impropriety. After all, people knew who she was. She'd been suffering with her affliction for fifteen years. For a decade-and-a-half she'd been unable to attend worship or touch – or be touched by – anyone.

Jesus responds by stopping, asking who touched him, and keeps asking until the woman finally reveals herself. Why does he "out" her in this way? He "outs" her because he knows that the overly restrictive story this woman has had to live within is not merely of her own creation, but that of her community. If this woman's story is actually going to change, Jesus needs this woman to "turn sideways into the light and disappear" before the image that she and her community have constructed so she can re-appear in a significantly changed story. Her story must no longer be, "The Sick, Untouchable Woman Who Must Be Avoided," but "The Woman Whom Jesus Himself Healed, Whom the Community Must Now Embrace."

Sometimes, like the woman in our story, or the *Tuatha Dé Dannan*, we ourselves need to “turn sideways into the light and disappear.” Disappear not for the purpose of avoiding conflict or the hard work of human relationship, but for the purpose of shedding an old story and adopting a new one, much like a plant that has outgrown its pot needs to be transferred into a larger one or its growth will be stunted.

Before moving on, I invite you to take the next few minutes to consider what old story has Radio KFKD been playing inside your head that you need to disappear before in order to reappear in a story with more freedom to grow.

II. Disappearing and Re-Potting

Many of you know that my family joined me in February to help celebrate my 60th birthday. They really loved meeting you, and spoke at length about how kind and welcoming everyone was. Thank you for that! While they were here, we also visited Harry Potter World in Orlando. Everyone in our family is a Harry Potter geek of sorts. (Go Hufflepuff!)

One reason I’m a Harry Potter fan is that J.K. Rowling is astonishingly adept at conveying in a children’s story some very powerful spiritual principles that often elude us as adults.

Take, for instance, a scene from *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, where Harry’s wizarding class is standing around a large potting table in a nursery for magical plants. Before each student is a young mandrake plant that has outgrown its original pot and needs to be re-planted in a larger one. The Magical Plants instructor warns the students that these young mandrakes do not like to be re-potted. When pulled out of their pot, the mandrake roots will open their mouths (yes, they have mouths) and scream to highest heaven. Their protests are so shrill that the students must wear protective earmuffs lest they pass out.

As one, the students pull the mandrakes out of their pots. The peaceful scene turns chaotic as the mandrakes scream bloody murder and the students do their best to shove the mandrakes into their new pots and cover them in potting soil. One young wizard, whose earmuffs weren’t properly affixed, passes out cold. Another gets his finger bitten by a furious mandrake. Finally, peace is restored as the mandrakes are all safely tucked into their new pots.

Do you see any parallels between the mandrakes and us humans? Like the mandrakes, we tend to resist change. It’s not so much that we fear the Unknown as that we fear the loss of the known. Even if we understand our present situation to be overly constraining and restrictive, even if we are in pain and feel like our present situation is gradually sucking the life out of us, we often resist change due to our fear of replacing an old story with a new one.

Think of all the turbulence that has resulted every time America has been invited to replant itself into a larger “pot” – a larger story – with respect to how we treat each other. Once, the “pot” we lived in accepted slavery as normal – even ordained by God. Then, when the Holy Spirit finally got through to enough people that this pot was neither created nor sanctioned by the divine, all hell broke loose. Quite literally. And, as we’ve outgrown pot after pot with respect to civil rights, each time the Holy Spirit replants us, the mandrakes have screamed

bloody murder. They've protested whenever we've outgrown the limited story we've embraced concerning women's equality as well, and LGBTQ equality. No, the dominant culture screams bloody murder, claiming "the sky is falling" every time society outgrows its pot – its story – at least until the sky doesn't fall and our roots settle in.

So, Jesus "outs" the woman in our story because she needed not only to be healed of a physical ailment, but freed from a restrictive story that both she and her community had accepted as reality. This woman needed to be touched, and to touch others. That's why Jesus made her new condition publicly known, and made it clear that none other than Jesus himself had healed her.

What does all this have to do with Pass-A-Grille Beach Community Church?

Well, I've seen a lot of change take place since arriving last December. Many, if not most, of you have seen it, too. To be clear, you have been abundantly generous and gracious towards me from the start. But when I first arrived, everyone at the church seemed to be walking on eggshells – or trying to avoid landmines. And you were avoiding each other. I would watch you arrive at church, head straight to your pews, and wait for the service to begin without much intermingling, then bolt. The overall effect was rather cold. And that first Sunday, when I merely made a one-sentence acknowledgement that you had experienced conflict last year, I swear the blood in every face drained before my eyes! Clearly, I had stepped on a landmine!

Within weeks, however, the ice rapidly melted and you became increasingly merry. At first, I figured the holiday season was simply having its usual effect on people. But Christmas came and went, and the lightheartedness and joy only increased. Now, you're walking the halls more confidently. You're laughing and joking with each other before and after worship. You're daring to pour your heart into this church again and it shows – even to an outsider like me. Perhaps *especially* to an outsider like me.

As your Interim Senior Minister, I'd love to take the credit for such rapid change. Yet, after 30 years in ministry, I know that a congregation doesn't move this quickly unless it was already on the move – moving from an old story into a new one; a pot it had outgrown into one it can thrive in.

What explains your movement? In part, I credit the pastoral leadership you've had from Pastor Guillermo and others, as well as your excellent lay leadership who have labored hard and often without thanks. While these contributions were significant, most of all, I credit you and your prayers. How many times did you pray to God, "Help! Get us out of this mess?" Nearly all of you were offering some version of this prayer. Those prayers acted like the woman's arms in our story. They touched the garment of Christ. Do you really think that there would be no response? It's not like you had to convince God to act on your behalf. But your prayers themselves opened channels of awareness inside you, channels of insight, and channels of grace so that you could receive the energies that the Holy Spirit is capable of sending. Healing power was released and received. Forgiveness started resulting. Relationships started mending.

I've seen the change in you with my own eyes. The change has been clear during my "getting to know you" conversations, and in the myriad meetings I've attended. The change has been reflected in my sit-downs with staff and lay leaders, and in the small groups I've attended or led. The depth of the change became abundantly clear last week at our Town Hall Meeting. There, sensitive subjects regarding what happened last year were brought up in a congregational setting – and none of the blood drained out of your faces. You engaged in open, honest, respectful conversation that clearly reflected a congregation that is ready to move on – and has already been doing so. Can you imagine having such a conversation six months ago?

It's not like I'm standing on an aircraft carrier with a sign behind me declaring, "Mission Accomplished." There's still work to be done here. But now the easy work is before you, not the hard work. You need to attend to your finances, making up for the gap left when members left. And you need to work on your accountability and decision-making structures so that you move from the old, pastor-centric model to a more community-based democratic (i.e., congregational) structure. Yet, the hard work of changing hearts is behind you now. You've crested the hump and have been on a roll for some time.

Of course, there are still a few screaming mandrakes who prefer the old pot to the new one. Apparently, mandrakes know how to send anonymous emails! But the content of these emails strongly suggests that the author (or authors) have little idea of what has been going on at this church for many months, nor do they apparently care to know.

My prayer is that when and if this person, or these people, ever plug back in and experience what's happening for themselves, they, too, will experience the healing that has been taking place here; they too will feel the expansiveness of the story you are now living within; and they, too, will begin growing and thriving in a new pot.

Until then, if you are receiving these emails and their harsh screams are rattling you, wearing earmuffs may not help, but you can choose to "turn sideways into the light and disappear." Disappear by graciously asking for your name to be removed from their list, then hitting "delete." And if they keep coming despite your request, either block the sender or keep hitting "delete." Then, turn your attention to re-appearing into the story that is so generously blessing us all with both light and life.