Chapter 1

Dale Carnegie Drive

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snap shot

the little boy standing
in the front yard—
in a single shot of
an unmemorable moment—
is me.
was me.
is me.

who knows why
the picture was taken.
to freeze any frame
of life is to leave
much undeveloped . . .
so look again—

my left foot is lifted:
I am in motion,
going somewhere
beyond the frame,
beginning the journey
between then and now,
from me to me.

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What we remember about our beginnings is what we have been told: here is where you were born; you were a happy baby; this was our first home; in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. We shape and share our beginning stories to make some sense of how we got from there to here, individually and collectively. Home is where it all starts.

Bishop Ussher was compelled to nail down a date and time for the start of Creation—Sunday, October 23, 4004 BC—and, in doing so, missed the point of the Genesis account. The storytellers before him who breathed life into the Big Beginning were looking back—after the Exodus, after Moses, after Jacob, after Abraham, after Sarah's laughter, after millennia of meanderings—to tell the story of how it all started. They were not trying to prove or defend anything; they were defining themselves. Some years ago, my wife, Ginger, and I spent the afternoon at the edge of the part of the Grand Canyon that is in the Hualapi Reservation in Nevada, just up the river from the Hoover Dam. We rode out on an old school bus to an unencumbered view of the natural wonder. On the way there, I asked our guide how long the Hualapi had been on that land. "As far back as the stories go," she answered.

When we tell of our beginnings, we go back as far as the stories go. The Genesis account was a way of saying *here is what we have learned so far: there was nothing and then there was something; everything about us comes from Someone—a loving,*

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imaginative, surprising Source. However we might explain how we began, John Berger says, "Theories of origin are attempts to explain our ongoing relation to the so-evident energy of the universe around us. . . . Every form of interrogation of the stars has been about this, and every theory of origin is a story to describe the experience of being here."[3] Home is where it all starts.

Even to say that in the beginning God was already here is another way of saying we were never alone. Time, as we know it, has a back story, a tale before time. The same is true for our individual lives and our societal roots. There was someone before us who shaped us, prepared for us, and made room for us to be a part of the powerful play that goes on. To try and tell how it all started is to go in a bit of a circle: from where we are, we go back and tell the beginning to carve an arc of meaning back to the present. We spend our lives trying to explain ourselves in order that we might find our place in this world.

Nobody knows how they began until they travel far enough down the road to look back. Genesis was written as an explanation for those returning from exile after they had wandered around for generations. Once they got out of Egypt and began to think of themselves as something other than slaves, they looked back to say, "It began like this." No one beyond those involved knew what happened in Bethlehem until after Jesus was gone. We write from the middle to describe and make sense of our origins so we can make meaning of both the present and the future. I look at the little boy in the picture and then write the story in reverse, looking for my creation story, my nativity. I move ahead by looking back to find where I began.

History, whether public or personal, is rarely an eyewitness account or, at least, an accurate one. We write and tell from

3 Berger, *And Our Faces*, 91.

memory—what we re-member (that is, how we put the story back together again) is not as much what happened as it is how we have come to terms with the circumstances, how we have made meaning, what we recall. We remember moments and feelings more than facts. In the earliest chapters of our lives, we remember what we were told, what was handed down. We learn the stories of those that preceded us and those that raised us, and in doing so we begin to learn what love means. What we think home is and what we hope home becomes depend on how those stories are told. The history we construct doesn't use facts for bricks.

Before my beginning, my parents had stories of their own and their parents before them. My family across generations, however, have not been good record keepers. One of my mother's uncles joined the Mormon Church and did a good deal of genealogical work as an expression of his faith, but beyond that none of us has explored much of our family tree. From the time I was small, I can recall my father telling the story of how his mother died in childbirth. He recounted how his father said the doctor offered his parents a choice: Either the mother or the child could live. She chose her son. I was in my thirties and my father in his sixties when the woman I knew as "Grandma C"—his stepmother—gave him a binder full of newspaper clippings and other things about his birth mother that she had saved over the years. From what I could tell, Dad knew nothing of the notebook until that moment. There in the brittle black and white of the aging newsprint was her obituary—she had died almost a month after he was born. After six decades, his creation story changed. How he came to be happened differently than the story he had trusted with his life. I'll never forget the look on his face.

My parents and my birth certificate say I was born in Corpus Christi, Texas, but I had my first birthday on a trek from Texas

to New York City, on our way to Africa; my first memory of myself is the picture of me standing in the front yard of our house at 15 Dale Carnegie Road in Bulawayo, Southern Rhodesia. I was about two. I don't remember the photograph being taken, or standing in the yard, or even much of living in Bulawayo. I hold the memory because I have seen this snapshot so many times—the shorts, the striped T-shirt, the white hat, the little sneakers, the one lifted foot—to the point that I feel like every picture I remember of that house on Dale Carnegie Road had me standing in the front yard as though I were some sort of yard art. I've imagined people driving by and thinking, "There's that little boy again. Don't they ever let him go inside?" The moment is so specific it has become timeless: I am always in the yard on Dale Carnegie Road. Milton starts here.

Getting from Texas to Africa as missionaries in 1957 meant first getting to New York and then sailing for thirty-one days around the Cape of Good Hope to Beira, Mozambique. A month or so before we left, I came down with double pneumonia and had to be hospitalized. When the doctors said it was safe for me to travel, we drove to Oklahoma City to see Grandma C, who was the only family member not living in Texas. While we were there, a man in her church who was a pharmacist told my mother he had a small box of medicine to send to one of our mission hospitals and asked if she would take it, since mailing it would not guarantee it would get there. The box was well packed and had a string handle to make it easy to carry. She took the package, which, she recalls, was an irritation for the rest of the journey.

On board the ship my parents met the Jankes, husband and wife, who lived in Bulawayo and convinced my parents to drive on to their new hometown (we had our car with us) after we docked rather than spend the night in Beira. They knew the way,

so we followed them on our first road trip in Africa. We had hardly settled in Bulawayo when I had a relapse of the pneumonia. My mother called Ms. Jankes, who was one of the few people she knew in town, told her what had happened and asked if she knew a pediatrician because I was very ill.

As my mother recalls, Ms. Jankes said, “Put the kettle on. I’m bringing a friend over for tea.” Her friend was Dr. Kibble, the only pediatrician in the country. He checked me and said, “Your baby is very ill and I’m very concerned. We don’t have the medicine he needs in this country. It is pediatric achromycin. The closest place is Johannesburg and I’m afraid your baby doesn’t have that long.”

In the midst of his shock, my father mentioned the box they had carried all the way from Oklahoma. Dr. Kibble said, “Let’s open it and just see what is in it.”

The only thing they found in the box was pediatric achromycin.

I remember the story because it has been told to me again and again, but not before I knew I was named for my father and for his father before him, and not before I remember the picture of me standing in the front yard: Milton in the middle of an endless afternoon, with one foot slightly lifted, ready to step out of the frame.

In 1957 there were few ways to communicate with our family back in the States and none that offered any sort of immediacy. We talked to my grandparents and my aunt and uncle once or twice a year, and then only long enough to pass the phone around and say, “I love you” over and over to the voices trapped in the transatlantic cable. As a result, I didn’t grow up with much hands-on sense of my family history. There was one, but I didn’t know it. I never lived close enough to go to family reunions, to spend the summers with my grandparents. Only after my

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parents moved from their home into a smaller apartment did I have much in the way of family heirlooms, and many of those are related to my love of cooking. Ginger and I became the repository for everyone's china, although we never registered for any of our own. We have my maternal grandmother's skillet, my mother's first mixer, and glasses that were wedding gifts to my dad's parents whom I never knew.

I'm not sure I could find any family burial ground other than my father's grave. My one family landmark is the house where my grandparents lived in Texas City, Texas, but none of us has driven by there in years. As far as beginnings go, my known family was my mother and father and, later, my brother. I was almost five the first time I remember seeing my aunt and grandparents, eleven before I truly remember them. Family, as I understood it, was made up of the people in my house, and was not tied to any particular location. I wasn't from anywhere. I was born in Texas and then I left and sailed to Africa so I could end up standing in the front yard at Dale Carnegie Road. And I left there as well.

"Then I left . . ." has been the operative ending to most every chapter of my life. I left Bulawayo, Lusaka, Nairobi, Accra, Houston, Waco, Dallas, Fort Worth, Boston, and Marshfield. Home has never been a place to which I returned because there really wasn't a place to which I go back. Carol Lee Flanders says a culture of belonging is an "intimate connection with the land to which one belongs."[4] Yet for me there was no homestead, no family place, no gathering spot that made me feel rooted. The story of my life has felt more like a series of vignettes than a consistent narrative, or perhaps I should say my consistent narrative was a series of vignettes, a stack of postcards wishing I were

4 Quoted in bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 13.

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there. My beginning—my first point of reference—is me standing in the yard. The bemused look on my face seems to ask, "Do I belong here?" The answer I internalized somehow was, "For a time, perhaps." Though I could not find David Carnegie Road again, in the beginning I stood in front of the only house I knew.

The current proliferation of social media has allowed me to reconnect with people I never thought I would encounter again, which has been a gift. Even with those connections, however, I am not good at going back. My life, so far, has not made much of a circle. The beginning feels farther and farther away. In working to understand what the word "home" means, I have made journeys of the heart and mind, but even then all that was left behind has stayed there. What I have learned is that the trails of emotional, spiritual, and relational breadcrumbs we call memories let us return to what is past so we can re-collect what has been scattered, re-construct what is in ruins, and re-member what has been thrown to the edges by the centrifugal force of life. What matters most about my beginning is what I remember: how I put the pieces back together in a way that calls me to be me.

At this writing, I have begun the slide toward sixty and I have lived in five countries and close to a dozen towns and cities. Call me well-traveled. Call me flexible, even versatile. Call me rootless—at least that is what I called myself for most of my life. When we lived in Africa and would prepare to return to the United States on leave every four years, my parents would talk about going "home," but it didn't make sense to me because I was going to a foreign country. I was American by birth, though I did not really know how to be American; I was living in Africa, but I was not African. I was an adult before I learned there was a name for people like me who were born in one culture and grew up in another and did not feel as though they belong in either

one. We are third culture kids. From first to twelfth grades, I went to ten different schools. Even the years I stayed in the same place most of my classmates did not; I learned to connect quickly and not to get too attached, to enjoy whatever time there was without much sense of creating either a history or a future.

Home, even for those of us who did not stay put, is the place we come from. It may or may not be where we return, but it is where we begin: our opening scene, though not necessarily our birth; our indelible memory or impression. Before we become, we begin, and that happens at home. Those beginnings offer us a sense of identity, which may or may not reside in our biology, yet home is also about who we come from as much as it is where. Some of us are born one place and find home in another. Home is tied to how we are named and how we name ourselves. I was named Milton. I was named Cunningham. Both names offered something to grow into and something to grow beyond. Home, as the beginning, also has to do with a sense of security and safety. Again, that beginning may not have anything to do with our birth. In *The Sacred Journey: A Memoir of Early Days*, Frederick Buechner talks of life before his father's suicide as "once below a time," using a phrase he borrowed from Dylan Thomas.

> Once below a time, he says in his poem "Fern Hill," meaning, I assume, that, for a child, time in the sense of something to measure and keep track of, time as the great circus parade of past, present, and future, cause and effect, has scarcely started yet and means little because for a child all time is by and large now time and apparently endless.[5]

5 Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey: A Memoir of Early Days* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982) 9.

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One of the reasons I resonate with so many stories from the Hebrew Scripture is that the people were always moving. Abraham was much older than I when God spoke to him while he was standing in his front yard and he realized that life was about to become a transient exercise. He and Moses and the prophets taught a whole nation of people to stay on the move, to live life on the way rather than at the place. Even Jesus said, "Foxes have dens and the birds in the sky have nests, but the Human One has no place to lay his head" (Luke 9:58, CEB). The story of faith, as I came to understand it, was as rootless as I was. bell hooks says the experience of exile can "change your mind, utterly transform one's perception of the world as home."[6]

Home, for the Hebrew people, was where they had come from and was also a place they had yet to actually reach for much of their story. The land was promised, not actualized. Where they were at any time was probably called home, but it was a moveable feast. Even their image of God and the tabernacle put the Most High in a sort of cosmic Airstream trailer. One day, they would get to the Promised Land, one day they would build the Temple. Once they finally settled down, they were never the same. I wonder how often they went back to all the stones stacked in the desert.

The home of our beginning is also a reference point: this is how life is, or how life is supposed to be. I remember the first time I went to someone else's house for a sleepover and they didn't have a trash can under the sink in the kitchen. The bathroom was not where it was supposed to be. They had different stuff in the fridge. I felt lost, displaced. Home is that place against which everything else is measured. Such a reference point can also be called an altar: the place to where we return to see what

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6 hooks, 13.

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has changed and how we have changed since the last time. The relational rituals we develop are the spiritual furniture that offers us sanctuary. Herein lies part of the power and pull of liturgy: the well-worn paths of meaning in the prayers and hymns we have sung down the years and the invitation to come once more to the table because all is now ready call us back to our beginnings and send us out on another sojourn. The pulse of God's grace sets the rhythm for remembering and becoming.

In Robert Olen Butler's short story "Fairy Tale," the narrator, a Vietnamese immigrant new to both the American land and its language, connects a soldier's account of climbing up on a bull to ride it with the "once upon a time" beginnings of children's stories and asks another man if they mean the same thing. He says they do. "I think this is very nice," she says, "how you get up on the back of time and ride and you don't know where it will go and when it will throw you off."[7] By the time I became yard art, I had sailed ten thousand miles and nearly died. Twice. Yet, for all I knew, I was home. That was my yard, my house. I don't remember much of Rhodesia at all and, somehow, I look into that little boy's eyes and see me. I feel like this is where I began, where I climbed up on a time to tell the story of Milton. It began like this . . . .

7 Robert Olen Butler, "Fairy Tale," in *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* (New York: Grove Press, 1992), 45.