GOING HOME

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It's a straight shot from my northwest Evanston home to one of Chicago's most notorious neighborhoods—West Garfield Park. I'm driving 12 miles south down Crawford Avenue, the street name changing to Pulaski Road at the Chicago border. Not just a sojourn of miles, this journey takes me to distant recesses of childhood memories, across generations to my father's youth, and after nearly 40 years, to Bethel Lutheran Church, once the center of my world and the social core of my dad's life since his birth in 1914.

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My father inspires the trip—even though he died in 1989. After my mom's death five years later, my two brothers and I rummaged among the corners and cobwebs of our former home's attic, sorting the trivial from the treasures. We found the latter in a box, labeled in my mother's neat printing: "Fred's and Lillian's Diaries." Tantalizing as it was, we stored it in my garage with other memorabilia. After years of wondering, I finally just hauled the box into my house to see what secrets it held. Crowded among the yellowing journals, I found a small, tattered book with the title "Diary and Daily Reminder" embossed into its green cover. My dad began making entries on January 1, 1933.

As I read his neat, Palmer-style handwriting, my father's 19-year-old voice spirited me back to a bygone era, where I viewed his young life unspool off the pages like an old film. I saw him singing in the choir, jesting with friends, finding love, and working through youthful dramas in the Bethel of 70 years ago. These visions exhorted me to visit my former church, even though I knew I would be traveling to a radically different world from the one in which he, and later I, grew up.

My parents bought their first home in 1949 on Washington Boulevard, just a block from Bethel Church. At that time, West Garfield Park was 99¾% white. By 1960, African-Americans made up 16% of the population, and that's when the exodus of whites and influx of blacks accelerated to whirlwind speed, fueled by blockbusting, racial fear, and white panic over plummeting property values. By 1963, the neighborhood composition was primarily black. Then two devastating riots, in 1965 and 1968, reduced swaths of the West Side to rubble. Businesses fled and banks closed. West Garfield Park emerged from the smoke and ash as a community in crisis and for decades became the national poster child for urban decay. In May, 1997, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that West Garfield Park had the city's highest murder rate, many of the victims startlingly young. Drug dealing was—and is—rampant.

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It's not the danger of the neighborhood that worries me as I drive farther south down Pulaski. It's the church service I anticipate with a churning combination of trepidation and excitement. I'm eager to see Bethel in a new context, yet know mine will be one of few white faces in the congregation. *How will they greet me? Will they consider me to be an intruder—a voyeur of sorts?*

At Pulaski and Lake Street, I make a right, driving west under the flickering light and shadow of the el tracks. My memory takes me back to sun-dappled childhood bike rides under this same iron grid work. I turn south, onto Keeler Avenue, and instantly, the blue-green, rounded steeple of Bethel Church pops into view. It's a jolt to see this icon of my past life rising above the neighborhood homes, dominating the landscape just like it did 30, 50, 90 years ago. It looks eerily the same, yet different—the way old familiar places appear in dreams.

I park in front of the yawning empty lot across the street, and notice the church has an odd, boarded-up look. As I walk toward it, I realize why. Tough, ochre-colored glass covers the stained glass windows that used to shimmer on all sides.

I walk up the patched concrete stairs, which seem narrower than I remember. To the right of the stairs, carved into a cement plaque mounted on the red brick are the abbreviated words *"Evang. Luth. Bethel Kirche."* It means: *Evangelical Lutheran Bethel Church,* a reminder that this church was built by German immigrants at the dawning of the twentieth century.

I enter through the tall doors. Inside, an African-American woman greets me with a warm smile, handshake, and "Welcome to Bethel." Her eyes follow me as I enter and take a seat in a far back pew, at the aisle. It's 10:43 a.m., and the service is scheduled to start in two minutes, yet barely ten people are scattered in the pews.

As I take in the surroundings, I feel as if I have come back to a house where I lived long ago. The décor, the furnishings, pictures on the wall—all look virtually the same, but my family is gone. I see the same amber-colored, elliptical chandeliers suspended on thick chains from the high ceiling, the gloriously rich colors of the stained and leaded glass windows depicting Bible stories, which, though covered on the outside, are still brilliant from the inside. Painted under each scene in gothic script is a German Bible verse. Under the one of Jesus rising from the tomb, it reads, *"Ich bin die Auferstechung und das Leben." I am the resurrection and the life.*

But most astounding to me is the "In Memoriam" plaque that still hangs prominently at the back of the church, honoring Bethel members who gave their lives in World War II. The name of my father's younger brother, Frank Ebner Gartz, tops the list. At the bottom is

the name Joseph Coleman, the brother of my father's first sweetheart, Marie. When the plaque was mounted after the War, everyone in the congregation knew those young men, had seen them grow up, and grieved with the families, like mine, whose eyes filled and hearts ached as they exited past the plaque. They are only meaningless names now, from such a long-ago time. Does anyone in the church today wonder who they were?

I admire the craftsmanship of the carved oak pews, pulpits, and the towering oak altar, the latter almost obscured now by an enormous, vibrantly colored African print tapestry. Then I notice a plump black woman making her rounds among the congregation. Her hair is in tiny braids, dangling around her face and head. She greets me with a wide smile. "Welcome to Bethel, honey. I'm Rita." Her arms outstretch in an embrace, so I stand, and we hug like old friends. She tells me how Bethel changed her life and that she works for Jesus now. When I tell her my history here, her eyes go wide. "No kiddin'! Well, welcome home, Linda!" and she hugs me again. A warm flush of relief and growing comfort wash over me.

The church fills steadily. Just before 11:00 the organist begins. A large man, with close-cropped hair, dressed in a casual shirt and slacks, flips switches to add the timbre of horns, strings, bass, and treble to the rich organ tones of a bluesy gospel piece. Resting atop the organ, a silvery boom box with stereo speakers magnifies the music, sending it resonating throughout the church.

The service begins, and everyone stands to sing the first hymn, #136, "We Have Come into This House." I am intimately familiar with Lutheran hymns, but this one is foreign to me. The hymnal contains all Gospel music now. I join in, but my throat is suddenly tight, and tears well in my eyes. I take deep, steady breaths to relax my muscles to stop short of weeping, but long forgotten memories, an unexpected nostalgia, overwhelm me.

Suddenly, youthful voices pour forth from the back of the church, breaking the emotional grip. It's the children's choir, coming down the center aisle. Left tap, then right tap, part dance, part walk, they move forward, singing, tapping, and clapping in rhythm to the music. The congregation claps right along with them. Soon the children fill the space before the altar, on the steps where I stood as a little girl to say my lines for over a dozen Christmas pageants; where my parents took their wedding vows; where generations of German-Americans came to make their confirmation and partake in Holy Communion.

The 15 kids, ranging in age from about eight into their teens, fill the air with the sweetness and power of their song. A little boy, no older than ten, takes a microphone. He sings a line, and the choir responds. So does the congregation. Participation. Interaction. This is what Bethel is about now. Joyous gospel anthems and hymns bring congregants to their feet again and again, many raising one or both hands, palms forward in a gesture of praise.

The pastor, Reverend Maxine Washington, wears a billowing, ankle-length white minister's robe. A purple silken scarf, with a brocaded cross adorning each end, drapes around her shoulders and extends down the entire front of her vestment. Her curly, short black hair is parted just slightly off center. Large glasses magnify bright, friendly eyes, and her smile is expansive and contagious. She appears fiftyish and exudes joy in her mission.

When she reads the lessons from the Old, then New Testament, individuals call out their agreement from all around the church.

"Yeah!"

"Tha's right!"

"Mm hm."

Now comes the time for "The Passing of the Peace," when everyone shakes hands with those nearest in the pews. In my experience in Catholic, Episcopal, Protestant, nondenominational, Unitarian—all white churches—this exchange is typically finished in about 30 seconds. Here at Bethel, when it's time to "pass the peace," it's like a signal to party! Everyone leaps up from his seat, greeting friends and visitors all around the church, clasping hands, patting backs, catching up. At least seven total strangers hug me, as I move around to greet as many as I can. It takes at least ten minutes until we are all back in our original places.

Pastor Washington asks any visitors to stand. About six of us get up. Another couple and I are the only whites. The pastor shouts with enthusiasm, "We are the friendliest church in the world! We want to welcome you!" The entire congregation sings to us once, twice, three times: "Welcome to Bethel, welcome to Bethel, the friendliest church in the world," the same words emblazoned on a huge fabric banner at the front of the church. The pastor approaches each visitor with a wireless microphone, asking us to introduce ourselves and tell where we're from.

I don't say, "I'm from Evanston." I want to make a connection, so I say, "I was raised right here on the West Side at 4222 West Washington Boulevard, and I was confirmed here at Bethel, and so were my two brothers, and my father, and my uncles. My parents were married at this altar." My eyes fill with tears again. The whole congregation applauds, and the pastor hugs me, grinning broadly. "Welcome home, Linda! Praise the *Lord*!" Smiling faces from every corner of the church embrace me in warmth and welcome. There is no disdain here—none of the disapproval or rejection that pinched at the edges of my consciousness on my trip down. I feel only peace, inclusion, and goodwill.

Over an hour has passed, and we're only just now getting to the Holy Gospel, a place in the service that usually marks the 15-minute point. The church services I've attended always start exactly on time and finish in one hour flat. It occurs to me that this service is not about timetables. It's about meeting people's needs, however long that may take. And I think that maybe it's about more—about preparing its members for the

onslaught of temptations and tribulations many may confront in their daily lives. Pastor Washington will use all her powers of preaching, persuasion, and passion to strengthen her congregation for the fight.

The gospel lays the foundation for the battle plan. Today's lesson is from the New Testament book of Mark—when Satan tempts Jesus in the wilderness. Pastor Washington turns this passage into a battle cry, pressing us into action against evil. The first salvo is a hymn she asks everyone to sing: "Satan, We're Gonna Tear Your Kingdom Down." The organ intro is loud and jazzy.

Pastor Washington ascends into the richly carved, hexagonal oak pulpit, where I listened to hundreds of dry and dusty sermons, delivered by my pastor, Oscar Kaitschuk, and from which *his* father, the Rev. Albert Kaitschuk, preached to my dad, uncles, and grandparents. A photo of a seated Albert, shot from a low angle, looking imposing and authoritative in his voluminous pastor's robes, still hangs in the back of the church.

As we all join in the hymn, Washington sings along, smiling and rhythmically rocking in the pulpit. One choir member, a wide woman in a royal blue robe, stands at the front with a microphone. With each new verse, she exhorts one church group after another—the children—the men—the women—to *tear* Satan's kingdom down. When she cries out, *"The choir's gonna tear his kingdom down!"* the choir stands and responds with applause, hoots, high fives, huge grins, and enthusiastic responses. *"Yeah!"* It's a call to arms against Satan.

After that rousing hymn, the pastor has everyone's rapt attention. For the "Meditation," what we called the "Sermon," she plays on the theme of the gospel and the song, using repetition to make her point. "Satan *want* to tempt us," she exclaims in the dialect of the community. The people call back:

"Amen!"

"Yeah!"

"Say it!"

She points, sweeps her hands across the congregation, shakes her head, preaches in a rough cadence. "*Satan*, we gonna *tear* your kingdom down!" Her voice seems to literally tear with gravel and grit on the word. Loud applause and dozens of responses echo throughout the church:

"Yeah!"

"Uh-huh!"

"Amen!"

"If *Jee*-sus had to meet Satan, who are *we* to think *we* are Satan *exempt*! *Call back to me! We ain't Satan exempt!*"

"We ain't Satan exempt!"

"And the spirit *drove* him into the wilderness." She preaches that "drove" is sometimes translated as "forced…thrust…pressured." That nuanced meaning is her hook. "The Spirit wants to thrust *us*…to say *no* to alcohol and drug use… The Spirit wants to *thrust* us: to make us have patience with our children and for children to have patience with their parents—to fight against Satan. *Say it: 'We gonna tear your kingdom down!'*"

"We gonna tear your kingdom down!"

Lots of clapping. "Yeah!"

The pastor steps down from the pulpit, back to the level of the congregation, looking one person after another in the eye. Her voice changes to all softness, smooth and soothing. "Get rid of obstructions—anger, jealousy, anything." She relates an allegory of a boy who falls into a well and catches himself partway down, but is slipping and crying for help. "The people above promise, 'We'll help you,' but they never come. Finally, a man ties a rope to a tree and then around his waist. He lowers himself into the well and says, 'Grab my arm,' and he pulls the boy up." Pastor Washington is reaching, stretching her own arm high up toward the ceiling. She shouts, *"Everyone—raise up your arm!"* A forest of arms shoots up above the pews, palms forward, then slowly waves back and forth. "Jesus will *grab* that arm and pull you up. Can you feel it?"

Astoundingly, my arm actually tingles with her exhortation! I'm confused and surprised and delighted all at the same time. It's like an injection of courage and strength and faith—an assurance that if we just reach out, Jesus will be there for us.

After the sermon is over, she moves on to prayers. "Does anyone have a special prayer need today?" I'm stunned when at least 30 people get out of their seats and move forward. Some go alone, some with little children in tow. Four lines form before the pastor and three assistants. Each supplicant waits patiently for a hands-on, individualized prayer. Each, in turn, gets hugs, back rubs, cradled faces, caressed cheeks and heads; foreheads touch, rolling left and right against each other, hands of both people intertwined. If the rousing words thrust from the pulpit weren't enough, this immediate body contact seems like a personal, physical transference of faith and love. I'm tempted, but I don't go for a prayer—it's out of my comfort zone.

As the prayers wind up, two hours have passed since the service began, ending now with a final hymn. The congregants file out, one after another stopping at my pew to talk to me. "Welcome home," so many say and, with that simple statement, recognize the part my family and I once played here. I am touched by their generosity, openness, and goodwill.

I may seem as much a relic as the World War II "In Memoriam" plaque hanging on the back wall, except I represent in flesh and blood another world that at one time was also real and vital in this church. Bethel has moved on to reach out to the African-American community in ways that make sense for *their* comfort zones. The old world vanished 40 years ago, blown out and scattered by a tempest of racial change. But Bethel has stayed fast, the foundation on which a new culture has grown and thrived.