

## Tribe: Reflections on The Necessity of Roots

I am always interested in where people are from. Among the questions people ask in getting to know strangers, “where are you from” is my favorite. If I’m honest I’m almost more interested in hearing about the place a person is from than the lives they lived there. I’m working on that. A couple weeks ago I damaged our car door so we had to take it in for repairs. Our insurance covered a rental vehicle and in the course of inspecting the rental the representative and I chatted a bit. Me being me, I asked him where he was from. He said “Stamford.” “Your whole life?” I asked. He said he had moved around the town a bit, but he was from Stamford, born and raised.

I have met a lot of people like him—born and raised in Stamford. I find that fascinating, because I’ve never lived anywhere more than 6 years. (We’re hoping to break that record here!) One interesting thing that Junction—in rural Southwest Texas—and Stamford—in suburban Connecticut—has in common is that there are a lot of people in both places that were born and raised in the same place, or at least a just a few miles apart. There are a lot of people in both Junction and Stamford that have roots in their respective places.

My life, by contrast, has been transient. There are advantages to being transient, of course. I suspect, given my introverted nature, I would not have developed sufficient social skills had I not moved frequently as a child. We may also recall Mark Twain’s famous aphorism: “travel is fatal to prejudice.” Of course, moving is not the only form of travel, but it is a very effective form! The disadvantage is that lacking stability in place has often left me struggling to figure out who I am. Our places, hometowns, geographical regions, and the people in those places, determine our identity in powerful ways.

A significant experience in my life happened after a year or so into full-time ministry, during a time when I felt particularly alienated, like I did not belong even with the people in my church, that our church had a problem with the air conditioning. In Texas, during the summer, that means plans have to change. So we defaulted to a kind of community room, where we shoved as many chairs together as possible and had services jammed together. It was in a moment of singing when I realized that the words and the melody that I sung and cherished were also the words and melody sung and cherished by all those around me. I had found my people. For better or worse, even when we disagreed adamantly on important issues. This was my tribe.

At the Christian Scholars’ Conference there are always wonderful worship services each morning. I am probably the annoying friend that insists during breakfast that anyone within earshot should attend. I am touched every year as a group of people who come from all parts of the nation, and even the globe, gather together to sing, acapella. We do not sing dogmatically, but we sing passionately, and we participate in the many other elements of a worship service (sans the Eucharist). I find myself being moved just as much by the realization of the community of “saints” that I am with and part of as the words I am singing or meditating on.

And then I return to Stamford—to people I know and care about personally, and to a space where we take special time to reflect on how much we mean to one another. I confess to being caught up in the worship again. I am transported outside of myself, not so much by inner euphoria or mystic vision, but by the grace to realize that I am a part of a community. This is my tribe. I have roots here.

This world is not my home. You are my home. We are your home. God gives and sustains this home. Amen.