

ABRAHAM PATH INITIATIVE

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LETTER FROM THE ROAD, #34, THE MIDDLE EAST

ELIAS AMIDON

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Leaving Our Father's House

Separation

Four years ago at this time my wife and I were in Iraq, on the eve of the invasion. With the members of the Iraq Peace Team we were trying to bring to the attention of world media the enormous mistake the coming invasion was about to enact, and the agony that mistake would inflict on the people of Iraq and the world.

I remember feeling a sense of the inexorable, blind weight of my government's decision to attack. It seemed like a weight cast from mountains of habitual thoughts passed down through time, all of these habitual thoughts emerging from one root idea: *we are separate*. Separate peoples, separate nations. Our identities are fixed in separation. We take it for granted.

But this is not just an idea maintained by the Bush administration or by Western culture. It's everywhere. The Han Chinese maintain it; the Arabs in Somalia maintain it; the Québécois in Québec maintain it. Shiites, Sunnis, Kurds, Turks, Greeks, Jews, Welsh, Catholics, Brahmans, Navajos, Republicans and Democrats maintain it.

It is the enormous habit of our species. Our need to associate with a particular group with a particular identity in contrast to other groups with other identities is an old addiction. We seek security inside them, inside these structures of identity passed to us from those who have gone before, structures of tribes, ideologies, ethnicities, religions, and nations. These structures are the myriad houses of our separateness—they are *our father's house*.

Our father's house. Each generation of us remodels that house to some extent, tears down a wall here or puts up an addition there. But the walls of the houses of our identities are always built with the same concrete of separation.

I'm not talking about the natural differences among us. Our differences are beautiful. I'm talking about how we grasp onto those differences, how we identify with them to such a degree that they *divide* us from each other.

This has been going on a long time, so long we believe that's the way things *have* to be. But do they? Is there another way to experience the human condition?

Abraham

In the four years since the U.S. invasion of Iraq, I have become increasingly involved in a project in the Middle East called the Abraham Path (see *Letter from the Road #31*). Although I didn't

realize it at first, this project, and Abraham's story behind it, exactly addresses these questions of our species' long habit of separation.

The point of the Abraham Path is simple: to open an 1100 kilometer walking trail from Harran, Turkey, where Abraham first heard God's call, through Syria, Jordan, Israel, culminating in Palestine at his burial place in Hebron/Al Khalil. It will be a trail for all people to walk on, no matter what their religion or nationality. And more than a trail, it will be a focus for the constellation of historic sites scattered through this land that tell the inspiring and anguished story of Abraham's children.

I have just returned from my seventh journey to the region, this one with a delegation of twenty people from ten countries, a "Study Tour" sponsored by the Abraham Path Initiative and Harvard University. For the first time we traveled the entire Path (by bus), holding meetings along the way with governmental and business leaders, religious clerics, university professors, and leaders from civil society.

Everyone we met felt the sense of promise and optimism of this simple idea of a path wandering through the countryside. These are people who have grown up with conflict and who expect it. Yet there is something striking about the image of a path and the image of people walking on it, the image of our children and their children and their children. It touches a recognition deep within us of how things *are* in the truth of our existence, not how we think they have to be.

But why is it that Abraham's footsteps inspire this sense of promise? What is it about his story that has caused such widening ripples in the surface of history? What did he do?

I've come to see there's one crucial event in Abraham's story from which everything else emerges: God's call, "*lech lecha,*" Go forth! *And the Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your land and your birthplace and your father's house unto a land I will show you."* And Abraham did. He took a step. He acted.

That step created the path. It was a step away from his father's house. It was step into the unknown, for God had not told him where to go, just to go. Although we see in the history of the Abrahamic religions just the opposite tendency, with adherents of each religion and sub-sect refusing to leave their father's house, nevertheless at the heart of what is honored in Abraham's story is this particular step and the faith it signifies to walk into the unknown, to release the habitual thoughts and fixed ideas that reinforce our sense of separateness from each other.

This step is a subversive act. It undermines the entire structure of human identity. It is the ultimate crossing of borders, leaving our father's house. And at the same time it signifies pure faith, not the faith in beliefs, but the faith that this is a step into our real home, our real belonging, beyond the smaller belongings of our nation or religion or ethnicity.

I am not saying we need to abandon all forms of identity. We can still be Americans or Cambodians or Manchester United fans or Episcopalians or whatever affiliations we are comfortable with. I am suggesting we need to learn to hold these affiliations *very* lightly. They are affiliations after all, they are not who we are, not our true belonging.

What then *is* our true belonging? What is outside our father's house?

Glistening Eyes

Some time ago on a trip to Syria I was invited to give a talk to a group of about 40 Shiite clerics and businessmen at a beautiful mosque in the old city of Damascus. I hadn't prepared and was unsure what I should say. I got up before the microphone and looked at the circle of bearded and turbaned men, some in elegant clerical robes. I thought I saw suspicion in their eyes, their arms folded, waiting to hear what this American had to say.

Looking back now, I see this was a moment when I stood at the threshold of my father's house, looking at other men standing at the threshold of theirs. And for some reason I was able to take a step—a little one admittedly—and go forth into the unknown.

I started by talking about children, the little four year-old girl, Roquai'ya, a Shiite saint whose shrine was the heart of this mosque, and the Prophet Muhammad as a little boy whose birthday was being celebrated that day, and the infant Jesus who was spoken of in the Quranic verses we had just heard recited under the dome of the mosque. It touched me that we grown men and women had come here to take notice of these children who lived long ago, and the mystery of innocence and presence they revealed.

I told them I had recently been blessed with my first granddaughter. I made the gesture of holding her in my arms, and said, "Surely some of you must know how that feels, with a grandchild or a baby of your own." Suddenly I saw little smiles appear. Some of them glanced at each other and nodded.

And then I said, "When I looked down at this little one I suddenly realized she was not an American, or a Syrian, or a Russian, or from any nation. Where was she from? She was from God's country. And then I realized, oh my goodness! She was not a Christian, or a Buddhist, or a Muslim, or a Jew. What religion was she? She was from the religion before any of these!"

The men melted. Their eyes glistened. For that moment we were together, outside our fathers' houses, realizing that actually we all shared the same belonging, the same home, the same nation, the same religion, just like little children.

Letters from the Road are sent out occasionally by Elias Amidon and Rabia Elizabeth Roberts, telling stories and lessons from our travels and work in the world. An archive of past letters from Iraq, Thailand, Burma, Israel/Palestine, Syria, Utah, Brazil, and Mexico can be seen at www.boulderinstitute.org. On that website and on www.sufiway.org you can find information about our programs and activities. More information about the Abraham Path can be found by visiting www.abrahampath.org. To subscribe to these letters go to <http://www.boulderinstitute.org/form.php>. To unsubscribe write to elias@boulderinstitute.org and write "unsubscribe" in the subject line.