

Whenever I take a trip, I prefer driving the state highways, instead of the interstates. Interstates are wonderful for what they were designed to do, moving lots of traffic efficiently at high speed, but they have also succeeded in removing much of the flavor and charm of travel. In addition to flavor and charm, state roads also have historical markers, which I enjoy reading. Indiana has 518 historical markers, noting, among other things, the location of the 1935 National Corn Husking Contest, which took place in Richland Township in Fountain County. 110,000 people descended on Newtown, Indiana to watch Elmer Carlson of Iowa ascend to the heights of corn-shucking glory. He shucked 3,744 ears of corn in 80 minutes. You won't ever learn about that by driving on an interstate, but if you enter Newtown on State Road 55, and stop at the bandstand in the Newtown Town Park to read the marker, you will learn that, and more.

Markers remind us that something important happened somewhere, something we might have forgotten were it not for the marker. Now be honest, you had probably forgotten all about Elmer Carlson and the 1935 National Corn Husking Contest until I read that marker and reminded you. You had forgotten, hadn't you? Tell the truth. It had completely slipped your mind.

God is a big believer in highway markers. In the Hebrew Bible, whenever something significant happened—a might enemy was defeated, a gush of water sprung from a rock, a great hero was buried, an agreement was reached—God would tell the Israelites, “Put a marker there, or call that place such-and-so, so that every time you see the marker or hear the name, you will remember what happened and remember how I provided for you.”

Because we forget these things, you see. New challenges arise, we get busy with life, and we forget past blessings and important moments when we learned valuable truths. Nearly every day, I drive past a gray house on Indiana Street in Danville and remember 31 years ago when a girl I was dating broke up with me, out front of that very house, because I was being an idiot. Every time I drive by that house, I think, “Don’t be an idiot.” Now they’re tearing that house down, so I might have to put a marker there. “On this spot, in 1979, Philip Gulley was an idiot. Don’t you be an idiot.” That’s what markers do, they teach us lessons we might have otherwise forgotten. Markers are important. Don’t ever drive past a marker without stopping. You might learn something.

Our lives have markers. Anthropologists call them *rites of passage*, and every culture, every society, has them. They are events, often ritualized, which mark our movement from one status to another.

This month or next month you might attend a commencement ceremony. That is a rite of passage, a ritual that signifies someone's movement from student life into either work life, or more student life, if they're going to college. If you're a Jewish teenager, a bar or bat Mitzvah marks your movement from childhood to adulthood. If you're a Christian, baptism in some form celebrates your movement into faith. A wedding marks your passage from single life to shared life. These are all rites of passages, designed to remind us of an important truth or acknowledge our progress from one status to another.

While graduations, weddings, and religious rituals are the more obvious rites of passages, they aren't the only ones. There are other passages we experience, moments of meaning, when we pass from one condition or status to another, when a great truth is learned, or a milestone celebrated. I have a neighbor who loves to hunt. He has four sons and when they are sufficiently responsible, he takes them on their first hunt. That is a rite of passage in their family, the coming of age ritual that signifies the son's growth.

Why do we do these things? Why do we celebrate these passages? We do them to remember. In religious communities, we do them to remember what God has done and to remember what we are called to do and who we are called to be—the friends of God.

In our families and among our friends, we do them to remember our connection, our belonging to one another.

Last Saturday, I attended the commencement ceremony at Christian Theological Seminary. Quite a few of the graduates had invited their parents to attend. After the ceremony, a younger man and his parents approached me. The father looked like he'd just stepped out of the pages of *The Grapes of Wrath*. He was all leathery and when I shook his hand it felt like tree bark.

I said, "It's a proud day for your family."

He ducked his head, started to speak, got choked up, then said, "First one in the family to graduate from college."

You could tell he was so proud of his son.

And the mother was holding on to her son's arm, just patting it.

I bet they wouldn't have sold that day for a million dollars.

That's why we go all out at graduations. We don gowns and play beautiful music and give speeches and offer thanks and invite our families to celebrate with us. It's a big deal. It's a rite of passage, honoring the efforts and accomplishments of the graduates.

I'm going to be talking these next several weeks about the passages we experience in life—what they say about God, and what they say about us. Rites of passage aren't always pleasant. Marriage is a rite of passage, but so is divorce. Births are a rite of passage, but so is the loss of those we love.

We ignore these passages, at our own peril. That is why God, before having people rush headlong to their next thing, would say, "Let's stop here for a moment and think about this. Something significant happened here. Let's not overlook it."

Rites of passages invite us to look a bit more closely at life, celebrate our successes, learn from our mistakes. Sometimes, if we look really close, we might discover they've taught us something about God.

Rites of passage keep us from stumbling through life blind. They teach us to see life with new eyes.

The other day Spencer and I were at home and I said, "Hey, want to go to McDonalds?" Spencer is always game for the McDonalds. Growing up, if you mentioned the word, he'd be in the car waiting for you. But the other night he said, "No. I'm going to Julie's." Julie is his girlfriend.

That's when it hit me. Rite of passage. I'm no longer my son's first choice. He has progressed from one status to another. That's alright. That's the way it ought to be. But I wanted to chase after him and say, "Be nice to her. Don't be an idiot." But he knows that. He's smart, like his mother.

For a few minutes, I felt lonely and a little depressed, then I thought about it, and about my son's capacity to love someone deeply, and it made me happy. I wanted to build a little altar around that moment and remember it as the moment when my son began thinking not just about the family he came from, but about the family he might one day create. I don't want him to create that family just yet. But it pleases me to see that possibility on the far horizon.

There is, I am learning, in every instance, the possibility for so much joy.

It's like Thomas Merton said, "We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent and God is shining through it all the time."