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## The Circle Will Be Unbroken

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# The Circle Will Be Unbroken

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*Shelby Gesch*

There's a language to lines, I learned in my high school art classes. Whether it's universal or cultural, I don't know, but it's a language my heart knows as true beyond words. Vertical lines speak majesty, so the theory goes: tall trees, pines and California redwoods that reach strong and straight upward. Straight, towering trees that support the sky and hold the heavens in place. Diagonal lines, inclining upward like the Rocky Mountains, where we spent a summer in British Columbia, give the impression of urgency, of movement, of strength; the downward incline of valleys, a feeling of being powerfully sheltered. Horizontal lines like those that dominate the landscape of the Midwest reflect peace, silence, openness. Settling.

And the reversing curves, the contours of hills, the creeks and streams that flow through these two lands that span two ends of my life, are the signature of nature. They dance, moving gracefully across the landscape. They are the brushstrokes of creation, the tracing of the breath of life, the wind through the trees and translated through the valleys and ridges and over hilltops.

Not long ago, I drove through the countryside a few miles north and east of the little town where I live, a landscape that looks startlingly different from the rocky, flat fields just outside my town. It's a drive I don't make very often, but one I tend to take in mid-Autumn because I generally wind up driving a child or two out there for an annual church youth group event. So, when the opportunity came again, I gladly agreed to make the drive.

It wasn't until my drive home that night, under the light of a full moon and a just-beyond-twilight sky, that I really began to understand that there's a reason my soul responds to this place. There's a reason for the profound feeling of belonging, a vague familiarity I sense when I'm driving the winding roads through here, just on the border between Pipestone and Murray County. There's something familiar about the hills, I thought, as I watched the shadows lengthen in the sunset and settle between the hills, echoing a memory of the winding roads and hills I'd left behind last spring during my visit to Glenwood. That trip to Glenwood was

taken in late March, on a sunny day. This drive on the border of Pipestone and Murray counties was in mid-autumn, through moonlight and shadow. Bookends. Both landscapes seemed to strangely echo each other, these far-flung places where I've learned to settle my heart.

I'm not sure if I would have seen the similarities that night, winding through the moonlight-painted hills, past the fields coming to the end of the growing season standing ready for harvest, as I watched for deer to part the curtain of stalks and bound their way across the road, if I hadn't so recently returned to the place in Glenwood that generations before me called home. If I hadn't taken the trip that mid-March day, winding through the gilded early-spring dirt of the Loess Hills lying in repose awaiting the plow, I might have missed the connection to this place where I live now, sheltered against a different set of hills, just north of here, the Buffalo Ridge, the geographical feature hidden in plain sight that profoundly affects the weather out here, this rise in the land that channels the winter winds into sun-washed ground blizzards that dissolve just twenty miles south of where the land rolls out to flat prairie.

Home to me has always been the green-blue of a midsummer field, the vibrant heat of sunlight and rain soaked into the miles of rows of crops and fields of grass. Perhaps that's been the constant, in all my travels. Always a return to the horizontal landscape edged by gentle hills, this place that speaks peace. Somehow, something buried deep inside my soul learned the language of hills, from my earliest childhood memories of looking out the car window as we wound through the green, yellow-scarred, tree-thick hills that bordered highway 34 on our way into Glenwood. Something within me learned to feel safe here, sheltered. Learned a language that spoke home within the play of sunlight and cloud on the hillside and in the moonshadows that settle in the valleys and ridges.

Luverne, my current hometown, is only twenty minutes' drive north of where my husband works in Rock Rapids, Iowa, but there's a transition, however subtle, that happens along that stretch of

Highway 75 between Rock Rapids and Luverne. Maybe it's telling that most of the north-south roads, even most of the dirt grid roads, veer around a curve to the east or west on the Iowa/Minnesota state line before resuming their northward-southward route, even where there is no formal "welcome-to..." sign. I'm not sure of the history of this, but it's an effective way of marking the boundary—you can't miss it.

Once we'd finished with all our moving around the country, the dozen plus one places we've called home since we got married, we finally settled here, in this little rural prairie town. This is the home I used to think I'd chosen for myself, yet I know better than that now. This is the home chosen for me. This is where I belong now, though the sense of belonging is yet as fragile as those new needles of green just beginning their summerlong yawn toward the sun, growing daily fuller like the leaves in the tree above me in my backyard above me. I'll grow into things here, given time and sunlight and a rich, fertile foundation below my feet.

I am not yet fluent in the language of this land, but I know some of the vocabulary already. I know the familiar dialect of the Midwest, the variations of green over seasons and relations between plants, the birds my grandma taught me, the names of the goldfinches that nested above my mailbox and the bluejays that live on my electric meter. I know to wait for the wrens to return, if they will, to the houses we've hung for them on our back porch. I know the flash of red-black on the wing of a startled red-wing blackbird, and I'm learning to listen for and distinguish their voices. After so much transition, it's a good thing to make a home here, to be planted enough to gain a sense of continuity in the transience of seasons. To learn the weather patterns, to watch for the fall windstorm that returns each year, to take notice of the overnight miracle of spring planting: needles of bright green piercing the black velvet fields, bristling the land in neat rows, following its contours. Humid spring mornings like this one, or heat lightning in the distance opposite the sunset, distant storms fueled by the day's heat and the summer's restless energy. These are the things you don't really see without a few years of experience and, paradoxically, maybe don't fully appreciate unless you've lived in other places without this land's language.

I'm letting the birds teach me how to come home this summer. How to be fully present and

not let my mind drift, as it has the tendency to do, backward to the joy of the recent past or forward into the uncertain future. In this season, I find myself inside a blank space. A liminal space. An uncomfortably uncertain in-between. Here is fog. It's uncomfortable. Boring. Difficult. I want out of it, and I find my escape too often in daydreaming through the empty hours and, not often enough, in long walks. I think more clearly when I'm moving, but I'm trying to learn to nest, to settle, to find peace in remaining in this one place and take in the life happening around me.

As I was opening the side door to get the mail this morning, a frantic flutter of birdwings and panic flew just above my head. Mama bird, a yellow-green female goldfinch who made her nest above the porch light, had no warning as I opened the door just inches from her nest. The last time our paths collided, she fluttered past me through the kitchen into the living room, throwing herself against the front screen door in desperation until my daughter let her out.

They've picked a good place for a nest, really. Sheltered from predators by its height above the ground, bounded on two sides by walls, tucked securely behind the lamp. She or her mate found a strand of cotton batting somewhere and wove it into the cozy little rambling tangle of sticks balanced in place. But the downside of their location is that she gets at least two rude awakenings per day: one from the letter carrier and one from me. She must have remembered her earlier trip through our house when I opened the door too suddenly this morning and startled her into flight. This time, she flew out the door just as suddenly as she flew in, without the detour through the living room and the body-slam against the glass. She's probably got eggs in there by now, so I try to be more cautious, seeing as she can't really pick up and move house at this stage in the life cycle. Before I returned into the house with the mail, I stopped for a minute, listening for the sounds of young birds. This morning, though, I only heard the silence of an empty nest. If my haphazard observation to this point is correct, this is their second summer living above the lamp near my mailbox. They've circled back to this little home, which has held steady against the wind and the long winter in their absence.

I don't really believe in lines. Line segments, perhaps—that is, the shortest distance between two points. But lines, as defined in high school

geometry class, seem to me to be an impossible construct, something that doesn't occur in nature. A line, extending infinitely in opposite directions from a single point, seems impossible to fathom in a world full of circles. Circles occur in nature with astonishing regularity.

Think, for example, what would happen if we used that definition of a line to plot a course forward, here on Planet Earth. Consult the compass (a circular device, you'll notice) and set a course due perfectly straight Northwest. Start walking, and for the sake of illustration, we'll assume you have a boat at your disposal when you'll need one. Travel long enough (infinitely, if we're going with the definition of a line), and in enough time, you'll have returned to where you started. Not a line, but a circle. While you're stopped, take a look around. What do you see, if your view isn't blocked by mountains or buildings? A horizon line. But is it really a line? No, not really. Think about that compass in your hand. Turn around in one place. Three hundred sixty degrees: a circle.

In looking over that list of twenty-seven addresses where I've called home in my life, I see a rhythm of return, a pattern of circling back where I've been. Born in Omaha, with parents who grew up near Glenwood, Iowa, I returned to Omaha when I was three, and to Glenwood when I was eight. We moved to Ankeny, Iowa, near Des Moines, when I was four, and returned to Des Moines when I was twelve. Since marrying and starting my own family, I've made a return to Ankeny, a move and then a return to Wisconsin, and a return to northwest Iowa, where I spent my first two years of college, and eventually graduated twenty-five years after I'd started.

In my list of twenty-seven addresses where I've lived over my 46 years, I can find at least six cycles of leaving and returning, six completed circles. Perhaps this means I had unfinished business in those places that I was guided back to. Perhaps it means that there was something I left behind, something yet to be learned. I know this is the case with Glenwood. With my parents living there now—their second return—I've had another chance to reconcile with my Anderson family's homeplace. I've found forgiveness and understanding where there was anger and resentment. I've been able to see where my memories were warped by time and depression, and I've been able to correct my image of what I now see is a beautiful place.

I think of circles as a fingerprint of the Creator. A perfect completion, coming around back to the beginning. Of course, in a world where nothing is perfect, it seems those circles often resemble spirals or, to borrow an idea that I barely understand from W. B. Yeats, a gyre: a sort of spiral in time that constantly travels from narrow (order) to wide (chaos) to wide to narrow; low to high, high to low. Rhythmically changing, spinning between the illusion of control and something near chaos. But though Yeats is on to something in seeing the effect of a world that's not yet right, that at times seems to spin out of control, questioning how much longer the center can possibly hold in his poem "The Second Coming," I don't agree with Yeats's view of history as the way the story ends, the perpetuation of a world that is constantly held in the uneasy tension, fighting to find the balance between chaos and order.

We speak of cycles when we speak of living things: seasons, life and reproduction and death. In my faith tradition, we speak of four parts to the history of humanity: creation; humankind's fall into sin at the hands of Adam and Eve—a fall which affected the entire creation; the redemption provided by the sinless life, sacrificial death, and miraculous resurrection of Jesus Christ; and the consummation—the completion of the circle—at the return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead and the restoration of a new heaven and new earth, an eternal return to the perfection that God had intended.

Though too often, I find it natural to walk a line infinitely away from other people, infinitely away from love and selflessness, infinitely away from the idea of a loving Creator, I believe God circles me back, bringing me and all of God's other children with prodigal tendencies back around to where we began, but healed and returned to perfection. This is the story that guides my faith walk, this idea of living in the already and the not-yet, walking the circle and waiting for the return back to the place where we began, but better, fixed, cleansed, healed. And so even in my settling in one little prairie town in southwest Minnesota, I journey on, my course set by the ultimate Unchangeable, watching for the circle to close in perfect completion. The center will hold. The circle will be unbroken.