No Longer Strangers

Finding Belonging in a World of Alienation

GREGORY COLES

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Womb Nostalgia

Notes from an Alien Anthropologist:
Once grown, the human creatures seem to believe their place in the world can be earned. It is only their youngest offspring who truly understand the species' helplessness.

I get nostalgic when I think about my life as a fetus.

To be clear, I don't remember much from those days. Whatever mental notes I took back then never made it into long-term storage. Still, I like to imagine that I did a lot of deep thinking with my tennis ball–sized fetal brain, philosophizing into my amniotic fluid. If I'd been a twin, and we'd had some sort of telepathic connection, my twin would have been like, *Woah. This guy's deep.*

The way I imagine it, being in the womb is like soaking in a perfectly warm bath. My eyes are closed, everything shrouded in gentle blackness. The sounds I hear are also sounds I feel: the pulsing of two hearts—one close by, one distant—and the murmur of voices that reach me in vibrations through the water. One of these voices is richer than all the others, more all-consuming. It is the voice of my mother—the voice of the universe herself.

All I need is the atmosphere I call home. I'm immersed in protection, immersed in nutrition, immersed in oxygen, without needing to claim anything for myself. Each moment and its gifts come to me unasked for, undeserved. Tastes and smells are automatically included with the rental package. It never occurs to me

to earn something. There's nothing to try harder at, nothing to get anxious about. I'm not on the way to anywhere.

I exist.

That's all.

That's enough.

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I paid my mother's womb the highest available compliment by delaying my birth until a full week after my due date. My older brother John, by contrast, had arrived two weeks early, his exploratory impulse manifesting from the very start. *(What happens if I swim down here?)* But I was an incurious and cozy child, perfectly content to stay put. I was in no rush to go out adventuring and wreck a good thing at home.

My mother, unfortunately, did not take my tardiness as a compliment. She went on a lot of long walks, eager to evict me. As for my siblings, they mimicked Mom's eagerness. All three of them, in preparation for my arrival, had learned the words to a children's song that began, "Welcome to the family / We're glad that you have come / To share your life with us." They were excited about me, even though I'd done nothing to earn their excitement. They had decided I would belong. It was never a question in their minds: *Will the infant be worthy of love?* They loved me before I'd done anything lovable.

Laura, the five-year-old, was hopeful that I would turn out to be a little sister. Since my parents weren't the sort to find out the baby's sex in utero, Laura enjoyed seven months or so of wishful thinking before I foiled her plans by coming out with male parts and getting named Gregory Joshua instead of Amy Margaret. She took the news in stride and began honing her diaper-changing and weightlifting skills on me.

My brother John's very first memory as a two-year-old is of peeking over the top of my parents' quilted bed, just after my mom

and I returned home from the hospital, and gazing transfixed at the sight of the little brother he'd been waiting for. When I started crying, as is the custom of newborns, John instinctively took the posture of the protective older brother: "Mom, he's sad! Can't you help him?"

Strange, isn't it, how my life could begin in a world that cared far more about me than I cared about it?

I saw a video once on *America's Funniest Home Videos* of a little boy tapping his mother's pregnant belly and asking, "Do you have my brother in there, Mama? Do you have my brother in there?" When she answers in the affirmative, his mouth widens and he breathes in deeply, as if hearing this news for the first time. "Oh, thank you, Mama!" he shouts, wrapping his arms as far around the belly as they can reach.

My life as a fetus was the life of that little brother. I was embraced before I could feel it, before I knew what it meant to be embraced.

Perhaps our best moments of belonging are always the moments we can't earn.

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I grew up around the phrase "born-again Christian." It felt normal to me, the same way it felt normal that my oldest brother, Jeff, started teaching me SAT vocabulary words when I was six years old, the same way haggis probably feels normal to Scottish people. "Born again" was the term we used to differentiate people who *really* loved Jesus from the ones who just attended church as a matter of ritual. I never spent much time thinking about the weirdness of the concept. I pitied Nicodemus in John 3 with a patronizing kind of pity. *Silly Nicodemus, to misunderstand something so intuitively obvious.*

Sometimes our words become so familiar that we forget what they mean.

But when I stop to think about it, I sympathize with the consternation Nicodemus feels when he learns that entrance into the

kingdom of heaven requires a second birth: "How can someone be born when they are old? . . . Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!" (John 3:4). Nicodemus is picturing fully grown people trying to clamber back into wombs, trying to reattach umbilical cords to their bellybuttons and take another soak in the amniotic sac.

Weird.

And Jesus' reply doesn't exactly clear up the confusion: "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again'" (vv. 5-7).

Still weird.

Next time someone tells you they don't think "born again" is a weird way to talk about the Christian life, ask them how they envision "the amniotic sac of the Holy Spirit." See if that gets a rise out of them.

For Nicodemus, a Pharisee of religious and political standing, spirituality has always been a matter of learning and earning the things of God. His first words to Jesus in John 3 are, "Rabbi, we know . . ." (v. 2). God's presence is a cognitive matter. Nicodemus has seen the kingdom of God, he believes, because his religious training has prepared him to see it.

Jesus' reply—"No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again" (v. 3)—is nothing less than a rebuke of Nicodemus's self-confidence. Whatever Nicodemus can see of the kingdom of God isn't something merited by his extensive learning. It can only be a gift, given as Nicodemus is birthed from the womb of the Holy Spirit, helpless as a fetus, sustained by the grace of his Creator.

The return to the fetal state makes us uncomfortable. It runs contrary to everything we've learned in our tit-for-tat, pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps world. We're predisposed to believe that, in order to belong somewhere, we have to earn it. That to be welcomed

by anyone—and by God most of all—requires our most intense efforts. That being helpless inevitably leads to being outcast.

But the uncomfortable claim of Jesus is just the opposite: that the only way to God is the way of the fetus, the way that does nothing more than helplessly exist within the atmosphere of God's grace. To know Jesus is to approach him in weakness. Faith can't be conjured up by trying harder at our religious labors. Participation in the kingdom of God begins the same way my life as a fetus began: with a series of unearned and undeserved gifts.

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I've heard people say that our passage from this life to the next one will be like a baby's passage through the birth canal. We'll leave behind the tiny womb that has been our universe and emerge into something grander than our wildest imaginations. All the vocabulary of our old lives will be insufficient to scratch the surface of our new lives.

I'm partial to the way this analogy expands our conception of what heaven might be like. (With the caveat that, frankly, I'm hoping our early months in heaven involve a wider variety of beverages and a lot less feces than our early months on earth.) But what I love most about the picture of heaven-as-birth is what it teaches us about our present moment. If passing into heaven is like being born, then our lives on earth are as incomplete and temporary as our months in the womb.

We still know the universe in such a limited way. We still think the limited thoughts of someone philosophizing into amniotic fluid. We still hear God's voice with underdeveloped ears, like vibrations passing through the water.

Now we see like unborn children, imagining with our eyes closed. Then we shall see face to face.

Early on an April morning in 1990, after subjecting my mother to a thirty-six-hour labor, I left the womb and stared for the first

time into the face of the woman who had been my entire universe. I had tried to delay that first birthday, hanging onto the womb for every extra second I could get. But my belonging in the womb was never meant to be permanent. It was belonging-with-an-expiration-date, belonging in a home that could only carry me until the time came to find a new home.

One of these days, I'll die and pass into a new kind of life. I'll look again into the face of the One who has been my protection, my nutrition, my oxygen. Maybe, when that next birthday comes, I won't be so afraid to say goodbye.

Leaving the womb, after all, is just the beginning of the story.

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