

Five years ago I was assigned by the Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church to Lorimor. My greatest fear in Seminary had been that my first assignment would be to Podunk. You know by now that there is a place very close to Lorimor called Podunk: Podunk Corner.

Today I find myself standing tall, not afraid, as pastor of a small town church. As a pastor I see people in great pain, weeping. I see anger and bitterness. I see deep grief, usually expressed for having lost someone or having lost opportunities. Grief comes to all of us. But at some point we realize we're alive and life is going on.

In terms of the journey we find ourselves on, we are aware that death comes in many ways. Death comes as losing something: a person, a place, a job, a community. There are many ways that death comes into our lives, hitting us hard. Sometimes there's a gradual death like a person with a terminal illness. There are stages through which death comes. Then at some point the final death comes, and it comes to all of us. There is grief, then there is new life, the resurrection. Or the pain, joy, and the hope we've been talking about.

Concerning our national myths and symbols, we know heroes are gone. Myths are collapsing. I was thinking about some of the heroes of our past. (Heroines are few, except Esther in the Bible whom I admire greatly.) Heroes and heroines start us on the path. They send us out. I was thinking of John F. Kennedy, out to start the New Frontier, thrusting us into a new future. And then he's cut off. Martin Luther King, Jr. had a dream, and he, too, was cut down. Somehow in these happenings we have come to realize that heroes are also human. You realize that they are not on a pedestal. You learn about things in their lives, their weaknesses. You can no longer put them on the pedestal you once had them on. So disillusionment sets in, and the grief process we all go through begins, and sometimes deepens into despair. We lose faith in Presidents. They no longer hold the hero or heroine image what pushes us forward. We have lost sight of that. Lorimor had a couple of heroes in its past. One of those was Shorty Steen. Shorty was the Editor of the "Lorimorian", involved in the Drama Club. He was one of those who created the "little church" building, and may have been one of the builders. His wife dressed the dolls for the display. There was a time when people needed Shorty Steen, and looked, but he had retired. And there was no one to step in and fill his shoes. Harry Lord is another person who comes to mind, a person who was moving Lorimor into the future. But Harry Lord is gone. And where is the new Harry Lord, the new Shorty Steen? We have experienced a void as a community by not finding those people, not finding people to look up to.

Some of the myths we have lived out of here in the Midwest are the taming of the West, rugged individualism. All of these fit in when people talk about their story. I'd like this morning to share with you Lorimor's story. Myth has to do with the story that a community or a nation tells about its beginnings, its destiny, its journey.

First, let's get an idea of a timeline. About 1887 the Railroad came in. J. S. Lorimor was asked to sell his land to the railroad. Until about 1910 we call this period the building of the town. The Methodist Church cornerstone is dated 1910. From 1910 to 1940, the heyday, what we've called the Golden Ages or the Golden Era. From about 1940-1955 there was a transition period, followed by a slump until 1970.

The overall picture shows there was a time when Lorimor was doing well, then there was a plateau, and in the 60's and 70's, the community began to go down visibly. We hit a point, then started back up again, and that's where we are today.

There's another way of talking about the Lorimor story. I don't know quite what to call this either, but the image is a cell with a nucleus. During the Golden Era Lorimor had four components in the nucleus: the High School, Main St., community-wide events, and overall care for the community. There were clubs, youth, senior citizens, men, women, and churches. "Stitch and Chatter", coffee hour, etc. All of these groups were going on in the community, but they met in these two arenas primarily, the High School and Main St. I was talking to Marilyn last night and got a list of what was on Main St. at that time. There were four grocery stores, two hardware stores, two drug stores, a produce house, lumber yard, three gas stations. You get the idea that Main St. was full of visitors, and this town was in full swing. Auto dealers, doctors. Then something happened, and we don't know when it began. We aren't sure this was first, but it seemed to begin with the High School. This was talked about as the time when the High School was taken away, stolen, "ripped off." Businesses closed. People retired, and there was no one to buy their business. People moved out of town and no one filled their places. The Main St. began to fold. The Community's main event--you've all heard of the Little World's Fair--moved to Afton, also. Very few people were left to provide care, to really "give a damn" about Lorimor. So what happened? We no longer had a nucleus at the center of the community cell. About all we had was the Lions' Club.

All of the little groups then became fragmented. People didn't come to town on Saturday night anymore. They no longer came to buy during the day on Saturday. They just went their own way. Youth were cut out of community life. The Lions Club in 1964 tried to do something about the decline by establishing Watermelon Days as a community event.

You can still see this fragmentation. You still hear talk about Lorimor as the "dumping grounds." You see this in the railroad car still sitting there after a derailment two or three years ago. You see this in the eyesores still around. We had a cow carrier in the mini-park area for years. You hear the story that "we are being dumped on." Sitting under the trees just waiting for something to drop on us. During meetings you can't get to the real issues because you are still grieving over the loss of the High School. You are still crying, and there is real pain which we have to deal with as a community. You can't get around to what needs to be done because you're working on a lot of different things, but nothing really focused. You get a sense of a struggle with life and death. You almost feel like the community has given into death. The community has a terminal illness, going through the stages of grief, first not accepting death, then postponing other feelings, and so forth. I'd like to read to you from a book which I've been using in grief counseling.

"Grief is a series of postponed feelings, stretched over a period of time. Memories of the past bring sorrow and grief, sometimes guilt and resentment. Grief sets in when one understands that everything is final, that there is no turning back." We cannot turn back to the Golden Era of the 1940's. You finally realize that you

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cannot go back there. No opportunity to restructure what has been. You cannot bring the corpse back to life. "If grief continues over an extended period of time, it cripples." This is what happened to this community. It was crippled, couldn't get moving again. "Some people seem to stop living." That happens to a community. "Their investment in a departed one is so strong that they experience difficulty trying to surrender to the reality." How long do we talk about this high school? I am so tired of hearing about this school at every meeting. I was ready to bury it again. People were living a morbid grief, cutting themselves off from possibilities to grow, believing it would be wrong for them to seek new expressions for living, or new relationships to people. "It's wrong for us to enjoy the school at Afton, because our school is dead!" You can't go there and have fun, because our school is dead.

"Grief involves the whole being." That's where you get to the deeps, the hurt, the pain.. It's really there. We can laugh about it, but it really hurts. You talk to people about the loss of their school, and tears come yet. They forget the promises that have been given to them. On the individual side, you feel you can't plan ahead because everything might change tomorrow. I've got to live for today. I don't know what I'm going to be doing tomorrow. I'll just live for today. I flit around from thing to thing, not quite sure of what I'm doing, not having a real focus. Any person who has experienced a real loss or grief knows that feeling. When my father died, there was a long period when I couldn't seem to focus, to get hold of things. I needed that time to get adjusted to the fact that he wasn't going to be there when I went home. That hits right there where it hurts. Also I mentioned that there were no more heroes, no Shorty Steens. But Shorty couldn't hold this up by himself. There's a limited span of life. He retired. He's still in town, but seldom does he get out, because of ill health. But Shorty contributed a great deal to his community in his time. But he couldn't do it alone. Individuals have a tendency to "burn out," to drop the ball, and say "I'm not going to pick it up again." So that's what happens to individuals. You just pull the covers over your head and stay there. You just feel like that sometimes. You let your house pile up with all its junk. "I've been in a depressed state for a long time." I know that sometimes there just has to come the decision that grief must stop.

This is Lent, and next we move into the season of Easter. The last week in Jesus' life he met betrayal, abandonment, and finally, death. After three days of the void, the emptiness, of blackness, something happened, and his disciples discovered the Empty Tomb. We wouldn't be here if we hadn't experienced something of the same thing. But we can't leave it there. Because Jesus appeared to Mary and said, "Go, tell my brothers that I am going on before you! Are you going to stay here or go tell the story! Decisions have to be made. Are you going to huddle and stay back here in your own little, fragmented world or are you going to go out and tell your brothers and sisters?" A person loses a loved one and has to decide what to do. There are arrangements to be made. They have to decide if they will live alone, whether or not to sell the house, or stay where they are. Decisions have to be made. Life goes on.

For Lorimor a decision was made in 1976. We decided to start a community center. You heard about that decision yesterday when the Lorimor residents talked on the panel. They began by raising money. A fantastic amount of money was raised in a very short period of time. Events were held. An enthusiasm was going. And then...

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they stepped back. They took that step back, or fell back. They were marching ahead before that. They formed the Boosters Club during that time. There was a glimpse of the vision of reclaiming, of doing something about this void, this hole at the center of the community. There was a vision of doing something on Main St. That was in '76. Then in 1977 we held a Town Meeting. This enabled us to focus our vision once more. You remember that later we painted over the thermometer on the community center building. This had been created to show the progress of the Community Center campaign in '76. It got higher and then stopped. At first this was a symbol of victory, but when it stopped, it became a symbol of defeat. "It's happened to us again. We have been dumped on again." So the whole experience threatened to start over again, but didn't last long. Thank God for that!

Then we had our consult in June, 1978. You've been hearing a lot of that story. I don't want to bore you with recounting it again. We began to reclaim. I hardly know what words to use. Main St. began to be transformed. A community center began to take shape. Boosters got off the ground again. Over-all community events happened: Watermelon Day expanded, the Christmas festival was initiated. A lot of things were beginning to come back into this nucleus. Main St., Boosters, events were put back into the nucleus, the heart of Lorimer. We hadn't arrived yet. We still had a long way to go. But this put the heart back into the nucleus. I am not a biologist, but that is what gives life to this "stuff" of the community.

This is just a glimpse of what has begun to happen in Lorimer. We decided to do something about our community, our situation, and our lives, our very lives.

We needed symbols to hold the meaning of this new life. Look at our grids. We decided the yellow must represent the Harvest Gold. The green is easy to remember if you have seen an areal shot of Lorimer. As you look down on Lorimer you see the Emerald Hills, well, not right now, but there is a time when it is green. The original slogan was not Gem of the Heartland. It was "New Hope in the Emerald Hills." We decided that was too long to put on all our symbols. I remembered that Iowa was considered the Heartland. We were singing a song about the Gem of the Prairie, and I said, "We're not the prairie, we're the Heartland." So that's how our slogan happened. We have a symbol that conveys the idea of new life, new hope in the Emerald Hills.

A song was written. We've sung it, you've sung it, almost to the point of not wanting to sing it anymore. This is the kind of thing that keeps community alive. Another sign that holds for me what Lorimer is is the Christmas tree that you can see on top of the water tower for miles around. The words in the Bible come to mind: "don't hide your light under a bushel." "You can't hide that light under a bushel, not easily." The Christmas tree is a beacon to other communities. It reminds us of the hope we are experiencing.

Main St. transformation is a powerful symbol for us. New businesses have come to town. A couple decided to go into the insurance business. A few years ago that would have been the last thing anyone would have done. The hardware store reopened. People are deciding that Lorimer is going to live. We are going to make it. We don't have to have a funeral. We can go on.

But in all of this, the individual finally burns out. The individual loses his or her focus. You have an individual here, over there and somehow they never seem to get together. The ability to go on comes when this individual, that one, and the others are all linked together. All of us must be linked together or we fall

and are gone. We need all of these clubs, churches, men, women, youth, elders, working together with a common vision, marching onward together. You realize in all of this that you are not just a little community out there all by yourself in the middle of Iowa. Somehow other communities just like Lorimer--in the Dakotas, Washington--all going through the "life and death" struggle that you are going through. You are not just alone all by yourself carrying the burden. That was one of the images that I had in the consult: we were "tired burden carriers." You do get tired of carrying this world or that world on your shoulders, and you start getting stooped, and sometimes you just can not get up. But if you have someone else also getting under and lifting that world, it's easier to carry the load of that burden. The attention or focus needs to be the corporate nature of the task. You also find comfort in knowing that there are other people who can empathize with you, who can cry with you. How painful it is, and lonely, to cry alone. But when you know someone else is crying, too, or there's someone there to give you a box of Kleenex, that helps, too.

As for getting things done, things go much easier and faster when you are all working together. This community center couldn't have been done by one person. No telling how long it would have taken John (McAdams) to do it alone. ("It wouldn't have been like this, either," John responded.) So it takes teamwork, everyone working together, holding the ladder, driving the nails. Whatever is needed, if you are working in teams, the job gets done easier, more quickly, and better. And you have more fun doing it. You see this as we move into the future. If you march together, you get further than marching over there by yourself.

The other side

The other side of that is that the march is never over. It never ends. We are continually marching. Sometimes we get pushed back, then we move ahead and conquer a hill, maybe even a mountain. We gain victories, both little and big. But it still is a never-ending grind, day after day after day, constantly wearing. What sustains us in that day after day? Here's where we must talk about what which nurtures us. "The care and feeding of the New Lorimerians." The people who are going to stand and march into the future. How are we going to keep marching? I get awfully tired, and I want to sit down. There's a stump over there and I want to sit down and rest. I may do that, but then I have to get up and move on. What I found helpful as a pastor is a discipline. This includes study, meeting with people on a regular basis, of actually doing something together, then of celebrating in the midst of all that. The rituals, symbols, songs are shared. The rhythm is the gathering and then the scattering. The rehearsing your story and then going out and doing. We have a creed that Boosters use at their meetings. It goes like this: "For my community I will strive for unity, for stability. As long as I am a Booster, I will build up and not tear down. Together we will work to make Lorimer community a sign of inspiration and hope for other communities to see." We take that very seriously. It has a lot to do with who we are and where we are going.

We realize that all of life is good. This is the life we have and it is good. All is approved. Our past is received. Our future is open. The Community Center "failed" the first time. We understand that. But we don't take that as a complete failure, because that experience gave us the vision to be where we are today. We receive that, and then move on into the future.

To close, let's sing the new song, "On Top of the Water Tower."

"We're on the top of the Water Tower, looking down on Lorimer, and wondering what the heck is going on. It's just not the same old town since the consult's been around, but I like the hustle-bustle going on."