

Jennifer Phar Davis: Becoming Odyssa: An Analysis

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Odyssa enters a new stage on her thru-hike in Chapters 7-9. There she wrangles with the trickiest animals on the trail: humans. Her quest so far has led her through snakes and lightning strikes, blunders and blizzards. By now she has experienced what her mentor, Warren Doyle, taught her in that 3 day workshop: “Don’t expect the trail to respect or be sensitive to your comfort level and desire to control your environment. In your avoidance of discomfort, you may become more uncomfortable. *Fear is weight*” (p. x, emphasis mine). Odyssa, now on the trail with hundreds of miles behind her, has faced some of her (and our) worst fears and by facing them and by stepping into them, some of the weight of fear has fallen to the wayside; and yet, there are more “fears” around the bend. In the beginning of her book, Odyssa tells us that the trail chose her. Indeed. In this section she increasingly chooses the trail and all that comes with it. And her choice will cause her to question herself and her life. Warren Doyle again: “You need to know that the trail can and will change you. Once you finish the trail, your life might not look the same as it did when you started. If you don’t want things to change, then you need to rethink thru-hiking” (p.11). And I would add...if you don’t want things to change then stay home. Ignorance is bliss. Right? What is this 21 year old woman doing on the trail by herself? Why does she continue to choose the trail?

I think this section has one answer to these questions. If you have ever traveled alone in a foreign place then you know well that you almost never end up traveling alone. There are fellow travelers and pilgrims constantly crossing your path(s). Just this last Christmas season I was in the museum at Tel Aviv University looking for a bathroom. I must have had that “lost”

look on my face because a kind, older gentleman said to me, “You look lost.” “Yes sir,” I replied “but then again I have been lost most of my life.” Without missing a beat he replied back, “Then you must meet some of the most interesting people in the world.” What an understatement. “Yes sir I most certainly do.” Why go? Why take on the trail? Why leave the sweet comforts of home? Because leaving home, crossing to the other side, will bring us face-to-face with the most unexpected strangers and these strangers will cause us to question our lives—to the very core sometimes. Crossings will cross our lives. And if I may play with this word “cross” just a bit... A cross(ing) is a crux, and a crux is that point on the trail when someone crosses us, joins us, threatens us, encourages us, saves us, stalks us, scars us—or worst—even kills us. We know deep down that quests are dangerous because we might die on the journey—the “worst” crossing of all. Better stay home. Home is safe. Home is harbor in a scary, dangerous world, and the trail is treacherous. Who, then, would choose a cross? Odyssa does.

When I teach Genesis 1-3 to my students, I tell them facetiously, “Go back home!” (I am hinting about the Garden of Eden of course). I hope I say it with a gleam in my eye because I miss “home” too, but I have been marked and radically changed by my encounters around the world. As a result, I am not the same man I was 30 years ago—so many people have crossed my path. And I, like Odyssa, have had to navigate not only the trail, but the people on the trail. Some people have crossed me with harm and betrayal and then others along the way have crossed me with “trail magic.”

So yeah, I think Odyssa is telling us that staying home is safe but safety sacrifices transformation. I think she is also telling us that staying home is familiar, but familiarity eludes the many strangers on the way. Some, like Moot, will make us face our fear of the truth. Then others, like Zeus, will invite us into their homes for food and rest. Still others, like Steam, will teach us and nudge us. And then, yes of course, there are others like the cursing crazy guy who will propel us onward. All in all, facing others make us face ourselves. Others are a catalyst to know,

question, explore and admire ourselves. They are the ones who cause us to face, perhaps, the greatest fear of all—the fear of ourselves.

Odyssa continues to encounter the trail and this brings self-knowledge. Now in these 3 chapters, it will be strangers who will bring self-consciousness. “Out on the trail, I don’t know whether to trust people or to run from them” (72). Others cause us to know ourselves, and this “new” knowledge transforms us like home never could.

Works Cited