

For Ruth
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Every life contains beauty within itself. Every place on the earth contains beauty within itself. Yet both life and place are full of impurities. The work of living is to find the beauty and to shape the stuff of our lives into something beautiful, to struggle against, to love through the impurities, and then to give ourselves away to the people and the place where we are. It is this offering of love that makes a place home.

The last time I had an opportunity to talk with Ruth for any length of time, she and I were flying from Greenville to Memphis after Aunt Rosie's funeral. She told me how she looked forward to moving back to Mississippi. She looked forward to spending time with her children and with her grandchildren. She looked forward to coming back home. I could understand that. For her the Mississippi delta, despite its ugly history, had for her its own beauty. Flat land laying parallel to a low sky, solitary trees connecting land and sky. Dark waters and mysterious bayous. Pecan trees dropping food into the yard. Warm gulf coast breezes. The blues. Church. Children playing. Fish frying. The taste of barbecue. People who look like you. People who know your history, the good, the bad and the ugly, and who love you anyway. Home.

Our relatively brief conversation during a relatively brief airplane ride gave her yet an opportunity to teach me some things. I have always learned some of my most important lessons from kinfolk. Watching and listening to the elders, to cousins who have traveled just a little bit further down the road than I, who have traveled a different road than I, listening to my children and to cousins of a younger generation, even watching children play provides a deeper philosophy, a more certain fount of wisdom than can be learned from books. On that airplane

ride, we talked about what was important to us, about defining and guarding our own integrity. We talked about boundaries and having the courage to protect our boundaries. We talked about coming home.

Ruth did come back home. She had an opportunity to spend time with her children and with her grandchildren. However, illness came and cut the time short. Illness came and suffering came and with suffering purification. Illness came and in many ways turned her into a stranger. But that too, in a sense, was a blessing. It was a way to help us let go. Sleep came and then the sleep of death came.

And now she is gone, but she is where her beauty and the beauty of the place are one and without admixture. She is in a place of pure love, perfect peace, contentment, rest and bliss. She has been gathered to our people, gathered to the ancestors who have loved us and taught us to love each other. She is with God, world without end. She is home.