

If it had to turn out that way for Moses, maybe it would have been better if the Bible had just skipped over telling us about it. Moses' personal story just didn't end in the satisfying way that might automatically inspire you and me to keep hoping, persisting and working indefinitely at noble, but long-term ventures.

Many years before, Moses had walked away from a well-settled, pleasant life with a wife and family in Midian, and had dedicated the next forty years to this "promised land project." On the flimsy basis of a conversation with a burning bush, he allowed his life to be disrupted and turned upside down. It had involved him in confrontations with the Pharaoh of Egypt. It had required an infuriatingly difficult selling-job to convince the very people that he was supposed to be helping and liberating. When, finally the exodus did get under way, it was a nightmare – nerve-wracking, confusing, stressful, and, at points, coming close to being a disaster. When finally they were safely out of Egypt, the headaches continued, owing to the fact that the people were ex-slaves –inexperienced, unstable, impulsive, and skittish. For most of four decades, they subsisted in a wilderness within sight of their promised land, but were afraid to go farther. Moses continued to work in every way he could to keep up their morale. But it had been an uphill pull.

So now, finally, they are to enter Canaan, their promised land. They are on the threshold of seeing the dream fulfilled that Moses had worked so hard to keep alive in them.

That is when Moses gets the message that he isn't going to be making the trip! No, there will be no promised land for Moses. What DID he get for all that effort and dedication? Arthritic joints, we suppose, probably an ulcer or two, undoubtedly a bunch of skin cancers from all the exposure to the sun, deteriorated hearing, fallen arches, insomnia, and who knows what else. Yes, that, and this one tantalizing, distant glimpse of the place where had had hoped to arrive, but now never would. As far as we know, there wasn't even a testimonial feast, where he was given a gold sundial in recognition of his several decades of faithful service.

That hardly seems like the way it ought to work out for someone so involved with God, does it? When a person has (as we say) paid his dues, has taken the risks, has done all the homework, and has been that dedicated, he deserves more than an unmarked grave in the wilderness, doesn't he? Putting myself in Moses' place, I think I would have found it more than just disappointing. It would have felt embarrassing. Wouldn't you feel as if you had made a fool of yourself, trying so hard and investing so much of yourself (especially compared to all the other people who got by just fine doing and being very little)? It's not the way it's supposed to be.

I suspect, though, that the Bible writers were careful to include this last part of Moses' story because this experience, in which a person never makes it to the promised land, is something that can and does happen. The most reasonable, legitimate "fulfillments," completions, intelligently-formed hopes, and well-deserved "vindications" sometimes are denied to us for no good reason whatsoever. Maybe Moses handled it well. It doesn't say. But for many to whom it happens, it brings a crisis of morale, of hope, and of faith.

It is expressed poignantly in song by one of the characters in the musical, "Les Miserables." Fantine, the single-parent mother of Cosette, sings, "I dreamed a dream in days gone by/ When hope was high and life worth living. I dreamed that love would never die, I dreamed that God would be forgiving. Then I was young and unafraid And dreams were made and used and wasted. There was no ransom to be paid, No song unsung, no wine un-tasted. But the tigers come at night With their voices soft as thunder As they tear your hope apart, As they turn your dream to shame. And still I dreamed he'd come to me; that we would live the years together. But there are dreams that cannot be, And there are storms we cannot weather. I had a dream my life would be So different from this hell I'm living, So different now from what it seemed. Now life has killed the dream I dreamed."

Hers is just one of all kinds of examples where people are deprived of the "promised land" that had kept them going; the outcome that, by all that seems fair and just, should have been there.

We're not talking here about temporary frustrations and passing disappointments. No, this is where it feels as if the very meaning of one's life has been snatched away at the last minute, where that golden time or eventual vindication that would have made sense of all the sacrifice, struggle, and unconditional trust, just isn't there to do so.

It smacks a little of something portrayed in an old, but famous cartoon from "The New Yorker." It's the one that shows a man in a dark passage with a look of utter despair on his face. The caption says, "Discovering that the light at the end of the tunnel is only New Jersey."

It's also reminiscent of the man who went to a fortune-teller and was told, "In your future, I see a period of poverty, of tribulation, of terrible struggling, and of repeated failures happening for you up through the age of forty-five."

The man asks, "And what happens once I am forty-five?"

Glancing again into the crystal ball, the fortune-teller replied, "Oh, after that you get used to it!"

Still another writer, obviously chafing against the way life so often fails to deliver the "fulfillments," "vindications," and pleasant resolution that would make sense and that would seem appropriate, suggested that maybe somehow it got turned around. He said that the way it ought to be is that, you die first and get that out of the way, then live for fifteen years in a nursing home until you are kicked out for being too young. You are given a gold watch and then you go to work. You work for thirty-five years until you are too young, enthusiastic, and energetic enough to quit. You go to college, you play, you party until you are ready for high school. You do high school, then grade school, and then become a carefree child. You have fun and have no responsibilities. You then become a baby and go back into the womb, where

you spend your last nine months floating. And finally you finish as a loving gleam in someone's eye.

Those are only other echoes of this "elusive promised land" phenomenon that's there for a substantial number of us.

A most obvious place that we sometimes see it is when someone has worked, saved, planned and dreamed of a much deserved, fulfilling retirement, then it is shot down by a health problem, an untimely death, or a severe financial setback. Most of us have heard about, or know first hand, someone who was felled by a fatal heart attack the weekend following their retirement.

Moses' experience has also been there for the person who, through loyalty and service to the company that employed him, had seen every indication that a career would culminate in a top leadership position and lead to well-earned financial security. It was so close that he could taste it, when the promised land suddenly disappeared because the company was sold, and, subsequently, closed by the purchaser.

All too often, it turns out to be the experience of parents who have invested every shred of their ingenuity, great quantities of patience, decades of concern, and much of their resources on their dream for their children. But then, not infrequently, it turns out that those children completely shrug off those dreams and hopes. Not only are they disinterested, sometimes they'll seem either ungrateful for, or oblivious to, how much of the very souls of their parents were tied up in their hopes for them.

Marriage can serve up an experience of it. For reasons that are sometimes beyond understanding, the most dedicated, selfless, well-intentioned, committed husband and wife -- instead of finding their way into a promised land of close companionship, profound enjoyment of each other, and the blissful oneness of which poems are written --they never get out of the wilderness of marital mediocrity (maybe even ending up terminating the marriage after

spending twenty years in a marital wilderness). Despite genuinely working at it, the relationship never comes together in the way they had both imagined that it was bound to.

The way it happened to Moses is still around, too. A noble dream, a selfless cause, a high ideal, a driving sense of purpose turns out to bless everyone, except the one who sweat all the blood over it. How can that be? If one is certain that he or she is really called to something, and he is truly sacrificial, and she is of noble intent, and they give 110% -- can the promised land of vindication or appreciation or accomplishment not be there? Yes. Such wrenching disappointments are reasonably common.

When it turns out that way, the incredulity, the disorientation, and the blind frustration can be awesome for awhile. He or she often goes on a desperate search for an explanation—any explanation. “Was the dream defective?” he wonders. Maybe some stone was left unturned. Could it be that I’m being punished for some reason of which I’m not even aware? Maybe it isn’t too late if I hurry up and do thus-and-so, or if I throw more money at it, or if I just make myself believe still more blindly, more fiercely.

In the absence of a credible explanation, there on the edge of the unreachable promised land, quite often a person beats up on himself with fragments of stupid old clichés like, “People who don’t reach their goals just haven’t tried hard enough.” “Good losers are nevertheless losers.” “If I had only had more faith or if only I had prayed harder, it wouldn’t have turned out like this.”

Not so! No! The difficult fact is that the most authentic, legitimate, appropriate promised lands sometimes will not be reached, for no other reason than the complexity of life, the randomness of events, the limits of time, and the interaction of circumstances that are part of being human in our world. Just as you and I, for no particular reason, are fortunate enough to not always be punished when we deserve to be, we also are sometimes stopped short of the well-earned “fulfillments” that would have made sense. When it seems to go against us, living with that requires as much faith and grace as a human being can muster.

It often means going back to understand, in a different way, the life you've already lived. (It certainly must have required that of Moses). It is to discover, perhaps, that it was the journey that was the main event, not the arrival.

It will probably require the raw faith to know and believe that the absence of the right outcome (or worse yet, the presence of a downright lousy outcome) does not undo or diminish the quality or the meaning of that which was given and created and set in motion by you or me along the way.

Third, instead of giving in at such times, to the petulant, but powerful, temptation to believe that God is uncaring or unjust or incompetent or non-existent, what is desperately needed is the trust that, in God's own way, that which you have offered and through which you have struggled is already being used by God to create the meaning and the good that ultimately will have made sense of your life.

That doesn't take away all the frustration and pain that can be there in the face of a denied promised land. It can, though, lead us away from hanging around in the graveyard of old hopes, when those particular hopes are no more. It also frees us to know that we are not failures, even though something that was very important to us did not work out. And if we're open to it, it may even lead us to a new vision or understanding of what our lives have meant and what they can still mean.

Those "promised lands" in life are nice, and some people are lucky enough to arrive in them and live there for awhile. But as we saw with Moses, with Jesus, and with countless others, they aren't ultimately, what gives meaning or significance to our lives. No, what our lives turn out to have meant, and what turns out to have been their real worth, is left up to God, and we can be grateful that it is.