"Did you look at the **sky** this morning?" *
"Let's go down to the **ocean** and be happy." **

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ALTERNATIVES TO CLAUSTROPHOBIA

1 * These were the first words of our pastor's sermon this morning. Her next words: "Close your eyes, then raise your hand if the answer is yes." (Very few, she reported, raised a hand: most of us, including me, were too busy just getting to church....It was Ascension Sunday, & Jesus' disciples "were gazing up toward heaven" [Ac.1.10 NRSV].) The liturgy always includes the Our Father ("who art in *heaven*"), which can be prayed (but shouldn't be) without ever noticing the *sky*. What good is noticing the sky? Besides providing weather information, the sky's vastness delivers us from earth-claustrophobia (literally, the fear of being locked in, confined as earth-bound creatures).

2 ** These were words I heard after worship when I remarked to a Greek-American on how the sermon started. For him, the equivalent question would have been "Did you look at the ocean this morning?" (I could have passed that test: from our house to church is along the ocean, which I always notice in passing.) He grew up on a tiny island, Lesbos, in the Aegean (famous for Greece's most famous female poet, Sappho, who [by writing mainly about love between women] gave us, from the place-name, the nouns "lesbian/ism")....Whenever the house became too small & everybody claustrophobic from a family squabble, you know what my friend's father said: "Let's go down to the ocean [which we call the Mediterranean Sea] and be happy."

3 Here on Cape Cod, the big attraction (even in winter!) is the beach, the three-level (sand-sea-sky) transcendence of ordinary life, dailiness. Going to the beach is for many, in nature, what going to Sunday worship is in spirit. Knowing their habit of spending Sunday mornings in their get-away on wheels at some Cape Cod beach, I asked a couple whether they'd ever been in the habit of spending Sunday mornings in church. "Yes, but now we commune with nature Sunday mornings. However, we do attend worship at our old church [150 miles away!] on Christmas and Easter." They even, as it were, take communion in their dormobile: they eat breakfast.

4 "I lift up my eyes to the hills....The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore" (Ps.121 NRSV). Pilgrimage to high places is a feature of the world's religions: the pilgrimage itself delivers from the claustrophobia of home, & high places from the claustrophobia of low (as the artificial sacred hills [ziggurats] of the ancient Mesopotamians flatlands, & the artificial cathedral-peaks [towers, spires, finials] of Medieval cities). This psalm "of ascent" (on pilgrimage to Jerusalem) reminds me of the 1939 modern Hebrew (Ivrit) grammar I studied that year. Printed in Jerusalem, it was for Jewish immigrants to Palestine, to which (especially Jerusalem!) they were (& this, though in Hebrew, was the book's title) GOING UP!

5 Sky, ocean, beach, hills....Moving our **transcendence**-meditation from geography to anatomy, think about two rules of desk-work: (1) Your body suffers if you stay glued to your chair for long periods; (2) Your eyes suffer myopia if you don't often enough lift them off your close-up work....Moving to psychology: Your mind needs to "get away" from the intense focus on a project....Moving to sociology: You need, more than for relief, to "get out of [the prison house, the claustrophobia] yourself" & into other people....Moving to theology: We need to hearken to God's call to "Come up higher" beyond self-boundness, group-boundness, species-boundness, earth-boundness....Out of the rut of routine into fresh experiencing....Out of labor into leisure....

6 Escapist commercial entertainment's huge success reveals that the consumer soul is confining itself to too small a space. Out of his own pocket, Geo. Lucas paid for his fourth "Star Wars" film ("Episode I: The Phantom Menace") & may get it back the first week (this week)! But Lucas admits to being about more than making a buck. He wants to reach young people (as well as adults) with his own mix of Joseph Campbell's global mythicism & traditional religio-moral storytelling.

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The reviewer who called "Phantom" mere candy for the eyeballs missed this depth. The film's very first words combine time-&-space transcendence: "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...." Not all escape is escapism. The biblical story invites us into God's metanarrative; the Lord's Prayer invites us to participate in an alternative world that is & alone is to be (i.e., has an ultimate future in continuity with its daily immanence).

7 "A long time ago," Geo.Lucas begins; yesterday (prehistory, history, archeology) gives perspective. The ultimate perspective is given in biblical revelation as God before & after the old creation, what science (with faith in onto-continuity) calls "the universe." Two years ago in the south of France, 37,000-year-old cave paintings with perspective were discovered--overturning art historian's long-held belief that perspective was an invention of 16th-c.[A.D.!] artists.) Two-dimension art simulates the depth our binocularity enables us to see by presenting objects as smaller depending on their distance from the viewer. In the invisible world of mind-soul-spirit, the parallel to binocularity is our neocortex, which is designed (yes!) to intervene between emotional stimulus & actional response (an intervention-potential increasing as the dendritic neocortical system develops). Mother Teresa could see the face of her Lord in the filthy faces of the dying in Calcutta gutters: multiple perspective! This Thinksheet invites you to think of perspective as an alternative to claustrophobia.

Divorce, in this light, is an escape from claustrophobia: one or both partners experience the marriage as suffocating, confining, imprisoning. "Little things" build up to big, big to bigger, bigger to biggest & BOOM! Irritations raise the temperature of the human stew till it boils over (or the pressure-cooker explodes). Molehills close-up preclude perspective, obscure mountains.

In two upper-class Littleton whiteboys, rage builds up to the suicidal-murderous level: they no longer have any perspective favoring life against death. Well-planned mass destruction was their negative alternative to claustrophobia. Making pipe-bombs, they were themeselves human pipe-bombs (the tighter-packed the explosive, the more powerful the explosion).

8 Religion, all religion, offers a spiritual alternative to claustrophobia by (1) hagiography, stories of the saints & their miracles (supremely, the story of God himself coming to us, to humanity, as "the man Christ Jesus"), & (2) spiritistic (transcendent) experiences such as conversion & communion & ecstasy (Pentecostalism being, now, the fasting growing form of Christianity).

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