

It's good to be back at meeting. I was in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania last Sunday to spend time with Presbyterians. And while there, met Phil, the weather-predicting groundhog, who came to my speech, took one good look at me, and went back into his cage for six weeks.

I was at the Pittsburgh airport on my way to Punxsutawney and asked the man at the gate if I had time to get a sandwich. I hadn't eaten all day and was hungry.

"We won't leave without you," he said.

I thought that was very nice of him and told him so. "It's kind of you to wait for me."

"No big deal," he said. "You're the only passenger."

Coincidentally, the man taking my ticket at the gate was also the pilot. We walked out onto the tarmac and there was an old, old airplane, with what appeared to be wooden propellers and canvas wings.

"It'll be a rough flight," he said.

Somehow, I'd sensed that before he'd even said it.

"Lots of turbulence," he said. "Half the time we end up canceling this flight. Probably should have today."

We lifted off and flew northeast across the northern end of the Appalachian mountains, the wind coming down from Canada and across the Great Lakes hitting the mountains and rolling up, buffeting us sideways and up and down. **Then everything smoothed out, and it was so lovely, looking down over the Earth at the farms and the fields and the water towers in the towns.** I thought of the people who lived in those towns, and wondered what they were doing right then. I saw cars moving on the roads and wondered about the people in them, where they were going and why. **I thought of their anxieties and worries, though from my perspective, high above the Earth, everything seemed right and good with the world.** The world seemed so large, it made our human problems seem so small.

Sometimes we just need to look at life from a different perspective. We've been talking about the qualities of maturity. **One of those qualities is *perspective*, the ability to give situations and circumstances their appropriate weight.**

My brother Glenn, who is four years older than me, had a heart scare this week—a heavy, squeezed feeling in his chest—and ended up in the hospital for a heart catheterization. I was thinking he was too young for such things, then it occurred to me he was 51 and no longer the strong, young teenage athlete I've always remembered him being.

And if he's no longer a teenager, that means I'm no teenager and I thought how close I was to 50. **Then my chest felt heavy.** Sometimes the thought of getting older can be scary, but one benefit of aging is the accumulation of experience. **So that when something happens to us that is worrisome, we have a reservoir of knowledge to draw upon.** We don't get as easily rattled when we hit a patch of bad luck, because we know life has its ups and downs, its rhythms of feast and famine, of bane and blessing, so we just ride it out. We gain *perspective*.

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven," said the writer of Ecclesiastes. **We don't know when those were words were written, but I bet they were written by someone with experience.** Those aren't young people words.

Perspective: the ability to give situations and circumstances their appropriate weight. Perspective is that calm voice in us that opens the door when hysteria comes knocking.

This past week was a very busy one and I began feeling anxious about everything I had to do, wondering how I'd find time to do everything expected of me. **I was complaining about it to Joan, who said, "I bet Brad would love to have your problems."** Brad is our friend who is battling leukemia.

Well, that's perspective. The ability to step back from our problems, look at them and ourselves with a calm, composed eye, and assign them their proper value. Perspective keeps us from bearing fifty pounds of worry over a one pound problem. **This can be hard, because when we're in the midst of difficulties, it takes real discipline to step back from a situation and look at it with some objectivity and cool-mindedness.** Our tendency is to inflate and exaggerate our difficulties until a relatively small matter begins to feel overwhelming and we feel loaded down and burdened.

Last month, my publisher phoned to tell me they were changing the title on my next book. **I had picked a title, they didn't like it and were suggesting a change, which of course is their prerogative.** But I stewed and fumed about it all morning. The more I thought about it, the more upset I became. Then Joan got home.

"How'd your morning go?" she asked.

"Terrible," I said. "You won't believe what happened to me."

I told her about the horrible thing my publisher had done and how difficult my life was and how in all the universe no one had it worse than me.

And she said, "I don't know how you bear up under the strain of daily life."

Well, I don't either. But I manage. ☺

Perspective.

The writer Robert Fulghum once said, "One of life's best coping mechanisms is to know the difference between an inconvenience and a problem. If you break your neck, if you have nothing to eat, if your house is on fire, then you've got a problem. Everything else is an inconvenience. Life is inconvenient. Life is lumpy. A lump in the oatmeal, a lump in the throat and a lump in the breast are not the same kind of lump. One needs to learn the difference."

Often we don't learn the difference between inconveniences and problems until something bad happens to us. **A man in my former congregation used to phone me each month and invite me to join him for lunch.** I would always go, but I dreaded it because he was always rude to the waitress, complaining and demanding, then never leaving a tip. It was embarrassing.

I'd come home and say to Joan, "I don't know what that guy would do if he had a real problem."

Then he got really sick. And it changed him. When you're dying of cancer, you learn there are bigger problems than a waitress forgetting to refill your Coke.

It shouldn't take a personal tragedy to teach us perspective, to teach us the difference between inconveniences and problems, between the lumps in our oatmeal and a lump in a breast. It shouldn't take trouble to teach us that, but it often does.

I thought about all these things, up in the air above Pennsylvania. **It's easy to see why the ancient people believed God lived up in the clouds.** We rise above the Earth and it gives us a long view, a new perspective. We realize the Earth is still turning without us on it, moving along just fine, thank you. **It is a bit humbling, but also comforting, and a bit liberating to realize that many of the burdens we carry exist mostly in our minds.** I like the perspective from up above, if only because it makes my problems seem a bit smaller and my blessings so much bigger.