

Point of reference

**Like Adam, we may end up treating God as if God were at the periphery. But where there is no center—or where we become the center—the circumference of life disappears.**

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [March 2, 2016](#) issue



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When the train I was taking into Chicago's Union Station stopped about 500 yards short of the platform, most of us on board took it in stride. We thought it was a momentary delay. It turned out to be 15 minutes long, which is the rough equivalent of eternity for a frantic commuter.

A cheer went up in our car at around ten minutes. We thought we were finally moving. The joke was on us, however, when we realized that it was only the train beside ours that was moving—in the opposite direction. It is a strange sensation to discover you are going nowhere when everything in your brain is telling you otherwise. What tipped us off to our foolishness was a reference point: a large brick building that came into view after the other train had passed.

All of us have reference points in our lives that provide us with our daily bearings. We might call these organizing centers, because they tend to possess generative qualities that fuel life, create meaning, and offer us a sense of place. Because these centers are fixed, they help us gain critical orientation in an often chaotic world.

Where strong organizing centers are absent, life turns precarious. Several years ago my wife tutored a third-grade boy who had bounced around between different relatives' homes every several months. It was obvious that emotionally and educationally he had been deprived of an organizing center.

We can be thankful for the organizing centers that steady our life. It may be that little silver cross you carry in your pocket that reminds you of your faith. Or that two-minute phone call you place to your mother every night may be a reference point of togetherness and love for both of you. The people of Israel treated Jerusalem and its temple as significant in leading a centered life.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *Creation and Fall*, probes why both the tree of life and the tree of forbidden fruit are placed in the center of the Garden of Eden. The reason, he concludes, is that the center is where God belongs in our lives. Like Adam, we may end up treating God as if God were at the periphery. But where there is no center, or where we become the center, the circumference of life disappears. Emptiness of purpose and shallowness of faith, which lend only vague and fuzzy feelings about God, are signs that something is wrong at the center.

I am delighted to be associated with the *Christian Century* as its publisher in part because this magazine is committed to helping readers sharpen the organizing center of their lives. Grounded in the church and gifted with provocative writers reflecting on important cultural and religious issues, the *Century* offers more than a splash of insight for your screen or mailbox. It's a reference point for our journeys of faith in a dizzy and uneven world.