

Oskar Schall is the fictional nine year old protagonist of the 2005 novel *Incredibly Loud and Extremely Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer and the 2012 movie with the same title. Oskar is a character who despite the many ill effects of trauma is above all things, a masterful searcher. This skill of searching was encouraged by Oskar's father, who fed his son's ferocious curiosity and ability to memorize and learn facts and data (a skill that was a tremendous source of pride for Oskar) by sending his son on what he called "reconnaissance missions". These were a mix of treasure hunt and mystery that took the shy and socially awkward Oskar outside his New York apartment, helped him become more comfortable interacting with people and after solving the mystery gave Oskar (and his parents) a great deal of joy.

It became clear in both the book and movie that Oskar's father was not just parent to the character; his father was also his confidant, friend, teacher, security, and the person able to help Oskar navigate a world he was frightened of because he seemed to be the only person Oskar felt understood him. In a sentimental sense, Oskar's father was his whole world.

Until the day Oskar called "the worst day". And those of us who remember a beautifully clear September morning 15 years ago today know exactly what day he is talking about. A day that changed everything for so many people, maybe even the world, in so many ways. September 11, 2001. The day terrorists used what Americans believe to be some of the best qualities of our country: freedom and diversity against us. Fifteen years later we have rebuilt the fallen buildings, erected memorials, we are still grieving the losses, some are still angry, still frightened and still wondering how we are to live in a world marked by terror.

Oskar's fictional story of an incredible search has been for thousands of people a helpful way to learn how to live in the years that follow "the worst day". In brief summary: Oskar's search began one year after his father's death on 9/11. It had been a terribly hard year for Oskar whose beloved information and facts had failed him in helping make sense of his father's death when the Twin Towers fell. In his search for meaning, and in some ways a search for his father, Oskar went into his father's closet where he accidentally discovered a key in a small brown envelope with the name Black written on it.

The discovery of the key became monumental to Oskar, who believed it was connected to his father in some meaningful way, and was an invitation to take on the challenge of another of his father's reconnaissance missions; this one, he believed, would lead him to something special his father had just for him. Oskar knew what he had to do: he had to gather and follow clues that would lead him to whatever precious something was in the locked box the key opened. And Oskar was brilliant. He discovered well over 450 people named Black in New York, found all their addresses, mapped them out, created a route and endeavored to spend every weekend for the next three years visiting every person named Black in New York until he found the one who knew about the key. He vowed nothing would stop him from finding what that key opened, not even himself - as he was even more frightened of the world outside his apartment after 9/11.

True to his word, Oskar embarked on his monumental search: a search where he met a lot of people, all of them living with some kind of loss of their own, all of them willing to share a part of their story with him. Although he patiently endured the stories and the people, Oskar grew impatient, anxious, and frustrated as his search also cost him time away from his mother and grandmother. But he was willing to pay the price if it meant he would find something of his father.

Eventually his search came to an end. With the help of one of the people he met early in his search, he was led not to what the key opened but to the person the key really belonged to. Oskar discovered his father had bought a vase the key was in as a gift for Oskar's mother and neither his father nor the man who sold the vase, a man named William Black, knew the key was inside. It turns out William's father had put the key in the vase to keep it safe. After William's father died, William had sold his father's things before he knew about the key, then it was too late. When Oskar told William about the key, for William it was like a miracle, for Oskar it was an enormous disappointment. The key wasn't his father's and hadn't led to any great discovery that would help Oskar make sense of his father's sudden and tragic death.

Instead Oskar was forced to confront his grief and the terrible guilt he felt for not answering the phone when he knew his father was calling for the last time on September 11, 2001. And in confronting this guilt, he received something he had not anticipated finding: forgiveness. This allowed him to start the long journey of acceptance, healing and learning to live in a world without his father but still a life that was very much influenced by his father's love for him.

Sometimes redemption is like that: sometimes redemptions starts with disappointment, but that doesn't meant disappointment is all there is.

And perhaps what Oskar discovered on his search is that the journey of discovery isn't about what you find in the end as much as it is about what you find along the way.

Oskar's incredible search might help shed some light on the two parables we heard Jesus tell in our Gospel today. Parables that are also about searching for what is lost: a sheep and a coin. Parables Jesus told to his critics: those religious leaders who criticized Jesus for the type of people who were coming to listen to him. Parables that we often interpret as being about what God was up to in the Incarnation: searching out the sinners and outcasts in order to bring them back to God's love. And that is certainly one way to see this parable. And let's remember that parables aren't just stories with one meaning; they were stories Jesus told to get his audience thinking, wondering. So let's wonder.

And let's remember, today's Gospel began not with Jesus searching, but the tax collectors and sinners coming to Jesus. Perhaps they were the ones searching, which perhaps might mean that God isn't the only one who searches, perhaps we human beings are free to search too. Perhaps there is value to the journey of searching: the leaving behind of what we know or have to risk losing in order to search for what we believe could be out there. Perhaps when a person searches for whatever they are looking for, they might even stumble upon God who has been searching for them. It reminds me of one of the very first stories in the Bible when God came to walk in the garden in the evening and didn't see the first man and the first woman and asked "Where are you?" And so the search begins. And how the psalmists sometimes ask where God is. Is there something about the relationship between God and us that is a searching for each other?

The parables Jesus told in today's Gospel aren't just about searching, they are also about the joy of when the search is over. Oskar's story reminds us joy doesn't always look like a big celebration with fireworks and a sense of achievement. Sometimes joy is a quieter thing, a different kind of celebration that looks more like redemption, reconciliation and healing.

Jesus' parables are a good reminder for us today that the past 15 years since our world changed, there has been some searching and wondering going on for a lot of us. And perhaps we need that reminder that searching, even searches that seem impossible, unexplainable, or meaningless, can also be holy endeavors because God can be anywhere, often in unexpected places and unexpected ways. Maybe we need the reminder that it is okay to not have all the answers, and it can be a good thing to go out and search.

It has been said by the late scholar and Episcopalian Phyllis Tickle, that September 11, 2001 marks a new period in the history of the world, one where we are experiencing what she called her book about this, *the Great Emergence*, that affects every aspect of our lives: culture, politics, religion, education and economics. It is a time when we as a people will question what we once took for granted about the way we do things, we will look to the past not for nostalgia but to search through old traditions and ways of doing things we've discarded and

wonder if we have inadvertently neglected treasures that could be brought back. It is a time, Phyllis Tickle said that has happened before, and is actually a predictable cycle that will eventually lead to a different era.

Entering into a time of questions and wondering can be threatening and intimidating for a lot of us, especially for those of us who have a lot in common with the character Oskar who likes answers and who took great comfort in the things it might feel like we all lost 15 years ago today: things like believing our country to be impenetrable to attack. It is natural to feel as unstable as the character Oskar who struggled with anger, rage, fear and lots of unresolved grief at losing what felt like his whole world. But that is why the search can be so holy and so important. Oskar's search showed him he hadn't lost his whole world, that there is a whole world outside his door full of people who despite looking and being different from him were still connected, still had more in common than was different, and that forgiveness is possible and so is healing and so is loving and so is joy. These things are not cheapened by loss, they are deepened by it. And it also means there is no need to be afraid.

Perhaps Jesus' parables and Oskar's fictional search can inspire us today, as we remember and endeavor to live as a people of faith to not be afraid to search, to wonder, to explore ways we can live our faith in a world that has changed. We can search for ways to stand up to fear, whether it is personal or institutional fears; we can ask questions, listen to people's stories, and we can have faith that the search itself, the questions themselves, will by us living into them, one day bring us into what might start out as a disappointment but could become our joy and God's joy.