

The Forest and the Trees

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The Rev. Melissa Carvill-Ziemer

The Forest and The Trees – Part I

We do it every day. Every day, she reminds us we go out “into the wilderness of our work and the world, making maps as we go, looking for signs that we’re on the right path.” Most of our journeying is spent amongst the trees. Every now and then we make our way up to the mountaintop where our view of the forest stretches all the way to the horizon. Those clear seeing moments are powerful; we tend to remember them and the way they make us feel – so vibrant, so alive. But most of our days are spent amongst the trees, submerged in the details, trying to find a way. Which way should we turn now? And now? And how about now? Which course is best all depends on where we are trying to go? Where are you trying to go? What is the vision that beckons you onward?

The spring that I was accepted to study at seminary a colleague at work asked me about my reason for going. I remember so clearly the moment. We were driving together back to the office from a meeting out in the community. There were lots of ways I could have answered the question, but I said only this: I am going to seminary because I want to learn how to walk softly upon the earth and how to live in harmony with all of life. That was over a decade ago. This is what I have learned since. To be the kind of person I want to be isn’t something that I could learn through any course of study or even through the process of ministerial formation. To be the kind of person I want to be takes practice, intention and constant becoming. The only way to learn to walk softly on the earth is day by day. The only way to learn to live in harmony is decision by decision.

But what choices should I make? How can I know which way to turn when there are so many options. Recently we decided we needed to replace the blinds in our living room as they have been recalled due to potentially being a choking hazard. We wanted to get energy efficient curtains. But which ones were really energy efficient and which ones were just green washed? How could we tell? We did a bunch of research and finally came to a conclusion we thought was a good one. But once we made that decision then there was the color conundrum. That was just curtains!

Choosing amongst our options can keep us busy and tire us out. Research has shown that the process of choosing amongst multiple options and weighing factors in making decisions is fatiguing in and of itself. It isn’t the kind of fatigue that might make us think we need a nap, but it does take mental energy. I read a story recently in the New York Times which described this process.¹ The research focused on a parole board in Israel trying to determine which prisoners should be granted early release. What the authors of the study found is that even when two prisoners were serving the same sentence for the same crime and had similar presentations to make to the board, those who saw the board early in the morning were much more likely to be released early than those who saw the board at the end of the day. The process of making

decisions is fatiguing and when we get fatigued, people tend to look for shortcuts. The two most common shortcuts include either making reckless choices or refraining from making a choice. When parole board members get tired, they tend to take the safe choice – deny parole rather than let a potentially dangerous criminal out early. But what about us when we get tired? This research can help explain why those who do a great job sticking to their diet all day long can't resist a piece of cake at the end of the day. Or why people who adhere to a strict shopping list can be tempted by the sales and candy clustered near the check out line. Making decisions is draining.

Making a living can also be quite fatiguing and time consuming. The injustice of wealth distribution in our society keeps some people nose to the grindstone just to make ends meet. But even those who make enough money to afford life's necessities are constantly being seduced by the possibility of working harder to make more. If enough is good, we are told, more is better. And yet, a growing body of research suggests that after we achieve a level of income sufficient to meet our needs, more money doesn't actually make us significantly happier, it just gives us more options.

So what does? After all, most people would include some measure of happiness when asked what kind of life they want to live. The happiness research is clear about that too: good families, good friends and supportive relationships, taking time to appreciate small pleasures, avoiding comparing ourselves with other people, exercise, having goals, expressing gratitude and practicing generosity top the list.ⁱⁱ That is the guidance of the psychologists and it all resonates with me. But I would add to it the wisdom of religion that extends beyond happiness.

Traditional religious people might say that their vision is to live the kind of life that will lead to salvation. Did you know that in its literal translation from the Hebrew that word means "to make sufficient" and from the Greek "to be made well"? So we could use that word too if we were inclined. We want to live lives that will lead us to a deep and nourishing sense of sufficiency. We want to lead lives that will make us well. But if that word doesn't resonate, we can use another. How about transformation? Could you say your vision is to live the kind of life that leads to transformation? And if you can, how would you say you hope to be transformed?

The Jungian therapist and Catholic priest Thomas Moore writes that there are two ways to think about the church and religion. "One is that we go to church to be in the presence of the holy. The other is that the church teaches us directly and symbolically to see the sacred dimension of everyday life..." That is how I think about the purpose of this church. Every day we go out "into the wilderness of our work and the world, making maps as we go, looking for signs that we're on the right path." Most of our journeying is spent amongst the trees. We come here every week hoping for a chance to step out of the thicket and see our lives in their wholeness. In this hour in one way or another we are always trying to remind ourselves of a larger vision and to practice the skills we need to live with faithfulness to that vision.

We come here to remind ourselves where we are going and which decisions really matter in navigating our way. We come here to remind ourselves how to name and express our gratitude, how to name and recognize the places we have gotten lost or fallen short, to practice being generous with our time, talent and treasure, to practice the art of being part of community. We

come here to remember the connections we have with all, to remind ourselves of the vastness of our relationships with life, to practice reverence before the wonder and mystery of it all. We come here and, if we have a spiritual practice, we make time for that practice so that we can remember who we want to be and how we want to live. Again using traditional religious language, I could say coming to church and taking time for spiritual practice is about growing in faith.

By that I do not mean belief. Faith as a noun is a limited, circumscribed thing. I believe faith is best understood as a verb. Take for example the description of the novelist Doris Betts who says that faith is “not synonymous with certainty, but is the decision to keep your eyes open.” Faith is about practicing how to see the forest and the trees. It is about minding the details but keeping them in proper perspective in relationship to our vision. It is about trusting that we can chart a path lightly through the forest with reverence for the sacred that always surrounds us. Faith is about remembering that we can always stop and wait when we are not sure where to go next, that we can always turn around when it seems we have chosen the wrong way. Faith is not about arriving at a destination, but rather about how we choose to take the journey.

The Forest and the Trees – Part II

What is true for individuals is also true for a community. Together, in this church, we are on a journey. We are on journey to be a faithful, passionate, transforming, justice seeking, learning, growing, serving community. We want to uplift, inspire and transform lives. We want to be the best church we can be. Several years ago we articulated a vision that has long been taking shape in this community. We agreed that in order to be the best church we can be, we need more space.

We need more space to worship. Did you know that last week some people who came to church left at the beginning of the service when they couldn’t find a seat? We need more space for our religious education classes. Our middle school group meets across the street in the Family and Community Services building, our high school group had to choose between accommodating people and furniture in the youth room (they chose people) and the nursery has just expanded into the former library in order to safely and comfortably accommodate all of our littlest ones. We also need more space for fellowship. With tables and chairs we can fit a maximum of 80 people in Fessenden Hall. There is no way for us all to gather together. Those are the facts.

But the reason we need more space isn’t just for us, just so we can be more comfortable. There are many ways we want to serve our neighbors in the community which our limited space makes difficult and sometimes even impossible. We need to make more room so we can be a good neighbor. We also realize that we have something good here, something that other people in our community want to experience. We need more room so we can invite more people to join us on our journey. That is our vision. It won’t be fully realized, when we have more space. More space will give us part of the resource we need to live into our vision. I think we are mostly in agreement about that.

But how to navigate our way through all the trees – that is an open question. Right now we are pursuing working with architects to assess the feasibility of expanding our space while we also

lay the foundation for the capital campaign that will enable us to make our dreams a reality. But here is the thing. Navigating a path all by ourselves is challenging enough. Navigating as a group is that much harder! We are sure to have disagreements in the course of this journey about which way to go. When that happens we will need to talk and to listen, to share with one another why we think one route is preferable. And, once we make a decision, we have to be willing to carry on even if the group decides to turn left and our counsel was to turn right. If it turns out the consensus of the group was wrong, we can always turn around. If it turns out the consensus of the group was right, we will discover again that there are many good paths.

As we navigate this journey together, our challenge is not only to chart the course, but also to remain open to the process of the journey. It will, of course, involve change and change can be frightening. It will also involve setbacks because a worthy vision is rarely easily achieved. To find our way we will need to remember the vision. To find our way back when we have gone astray, we will need to remember the vision. To let our vision be our guide when the way seems too hard, the change too uncomfortable and the discomfort too much, we will need to have faith.

Faith is about how we choose to take the journey. On this journey we will need to sing together and celebrate together. We will need to pray together and talk and listen together. We will need to let the commitment of those who lead inspire and energize us. There are many people in this church who have made a long term investment in the well being of this community. They have been walking together in faith for a long time and their example of loyalty, patience, dedication and good humor can teach us much about how to journey on. Faith is about how we choose to take the journey together. Thanks to the people who have been charting the course in the last decades, we are poised to take another leap of faith. Thanks to all who are committed to the vision, we are ready now to chart the course that will equip us to be the church we want to be.

ⁱ Tierny, John. "Do You Suffer from Decision Fatigue?" in *The New York Times*. August 17, 2011.

ⁱⁱ for one article about this research see Angel, Jen "10 Things Science Says Will Make You Happy" in *Yes Magazine*. October 31, 2008.