

## **Faith of a Mustard Seed**

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By Rev. Dr. Joshua Snyder

Ernesto Cortez, one of my heroes and mentors in community organizing, once said that “Tradition is the living ideas of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead ideas of the living.” When we make an idol out of the past, pretend that it was some golden age that is far superior to the present that we can never replicate, then we have fallen into the trap of traditionalism. Cortez’s point is that for our tradition to be a “living” tradition, we cannot merely point to the past and be proud of our accomplishments. We must also allow the stories of the past to inspire us to action today, and to dream about what tomorrow might become.

This morning, I want to continue the Service of the Living Tradition that we began last Sunday. In that service we honored the past; the members who had been with us 35 and 50 years as well as those who had passed away. It is good and right to do this of course. But what is the next step? After we have heard the story of what our church has been for the past 20 years, what story do we tell ourselves about who we will be in the next five? There are no time machines and

no do-overs in life; there is only learning and pressing forward. We must take what has moved and inspired us in our history, and honestly reflect upon those things that were mistakes, and enter the future with confidence. That is a *living* tradition that honors its past by bringing its spirit into the here and now.

Peter Block, the author of this morning's modern reading, is the kind of writer I like. He takes simple ideas and turns them on their head. He makes you look at them again in a new light. He doesn't like the question "How"?! How dare you?! That is the cornerstone to that quintessentially American philosophy: Pragmatism. Pragmatism is the notion that whatever is true or good is also useful. Utility matters, and the best way we know of to get at what is useful is to ask the question "How?" "How will that work?" "How much will it cost?" "How long will it take?" These are pragmatic questions. Pragmatism emerges out of American philosophy for good reasons. If you are a settler who is leaving everything you have ever known, to take the risk of setting up a whole new life in a colony in the new world, or the American Frontier, then "how" becomes a pretty important question. You have no time for pure speculation; you need food and shelter, and you need it quick. You are very likely going to be short on mindless ideology and long on the wood chopping and corn planting.

So “How” is deeply ingrained in our DNA, particularly in our culture. However, if we only asked “How” problems could arise. How do you know what the most pragmatic or the most effective course of action might be unless you do *some* speculation, some planning? Even Pragmatists and Utilitarians need to do some visioning work at some point. We have to have a direction otherwise we run the risk of going off half cocked on whatever we are trying to accomplish in life. Steven Covey, of Seven Habits of Highly Effective People fame, makes the distinction between being efficient and being effective. Let us take our frontiersman. Say he has to clear a path through the woods in order to travel safely through. He is a big burly guy, who wears flannel and has a long beard, and uses an ax to cut through the underbrush, when he is not busy posing as the spokesman for Bounty paper towels. Being a big strong fellow he cuts through it pretty quickly; he is very efficient at his work. It takes him all day to make it to the edge of the forest. When he does he comes to an astounding realization: he is ten miles too far south of where he was supposed to come out! Thus all his hard work was not effective. He worked very efficiently, but it was for naught.

It would probably serve our poor frontiersman well to be less efficient in cutting through the brush, and more effective by pausing every once and awhile to get a sense of direction. To reflect upon some key questions, “Am I really headed in the right direction?” “Should I

take a compass reading or note where the sun is in the sky?” “Why am I even cutting this road here in the first place—is there another route that could get me there faster?” One could call these reflections “dreaming” but I call them visioning. Visioning is asking the simple question, does what I do matter? It is a religious question really. It speaks to who we are as people and our place in the universe relative to others. Am I doing the right thing, even if it is the hard thing to do?

Peter Block would have much to say about our poor frontiersman. He would say that this man knew the “How” very well. He knew how to clear a path. But he rushed to the How way too soon, and didn’t spend enough time asking himself, “Does this path I am clearing matter or make a difference to me?” “Does this matter” is a yes or no question. Thus when people ask you How, you should instead focus on “Yes”. In other words, resist the temptation to answer an easy question that doesn’t matter, and instead ask a better question that may not have a clear answer.

This can be very hard and very scary. “How” can often be used as a way to deflect away from the hard questions by insisting on the doable. To give into that temptation is to clear a path very efficiently to nowhere of importance. So there is a place, a very important place actually, for the dreamers and the visionaries. This is not to say that “How”

questions are wrong or unimportant. They are vitally important when asked at the right time; later in the process.

I was very young when I decided to become a Unitarian Universalist minister; 21 years old. It was my senior year in college. I started my first day as a parish minister in my first church two weeks after my 27<sup>th</sup> birthday. I remember being very nervous about telling my parents of my decision; particularly my father. They are not UU, my mother is a liberal Christian and my Dad's religion is golf. I had an aunt try and talk me out of it because she thought I had joined the Unification Church—sometimes referred to as the Moonies! Beyond that though I was taking a big risk. My career choice involved years of graduate school at expensive colleges, which would mean a good deal of debt. I would have to jump through the numerous bureaucratic hoops of the UUA. I would get a grueling interview from the Ministerial Fellowship Committee to test if I was up to their standard. When I was done I faced a job market that had an over-surplus of competition fighting over fewer openings in congregations, and often these jobs did not pay well. Some of these factors have changed over the years, others haven't. The UUA even went so far as to compose a document it called "the realities of becoming a minister." This document pointed out all of these doom and gloom facts to the wide-eyed idealists who thought to submit their

names to Boston in anticipation of the ministry. They published this document a couple of years *after* I was already in the system!

My Dad is a pragmatist. He grew up on a farm in rural Michigan with three older brothers and tough father. He worked at a bank for most of his career, as a loan officer, a repossession collector, and even a branch manager—all without a college degree. Growing up I was often intimidated to ask my Dad for money. His job was to give, or not give, loans to people. I sometimes got the third degree just to go out with my friends. He is a pragmatist. So on the chosen occasion, I told Dad, “I am going to be a Unitarian Universalist minister!” You can guess what he said: “Do it! Take the risk. Go for it, if that is the thing that will make you happy. The money will come later.” I was pleasantly surprised! As it turned out my Dad hated his job, and when he got fired from it a few years ago, it turned out to be a blessing in disguise. My Dad is a “How” guy—he can clear some brush. But as the years went by he realized that that wasn’t what he really wanted to do with his life. He was ten miles too far south of his dreams. He got hired at a new job, for less money, doing payroll at the big factory in town. He loved it. He never felt like he was at work. Life made him stop asking “How” and made him ask a “Yes” question. It made him answer the question, “Is this the job that matters to you?” Yes. He wanted me to have the same thing.

My Dad was forced to take a leap of faith in his career. I chose to take a leap of faith with my career. Regardless, however, it is a leap of faith. None of us know the future. As the economic news has rolled in these past few months we have all had to face that very uncomfortable truth about life: we are not in control of things as much as we think we are. Oh we can avoid that truth, but it comes back to us eventually. So whenever we are considering where to clear a path, be it a project at work, a new relationship, or something here at church, we are taking a risk; and risk involves faith. Granted it may be to a greater or lesser degree, but there is always risk, there is always the leap of faith. When we get scared of the future, of the things we are not in control of, we sometimes run to the Hows we know and understand in order to stop the dreaming and visioning that can be ambiguous and open ended. It is better to ask the right questions than to get the easy answer.

In a way, this is Jesus' point in today's ancient reading. The word "faith" is a highly charged one in the Christian tradition. To Luther faith was everything—it was the key to salvation, and the foundation to his theology. The beauty of Unitarian Universalism, however, is that we do not have to go along with Luther's definition of faith. We are free to be playful with the word and its connotations. When we take this playful approach to words and ideas, without tying them to the past definitions, we can find new meanings, new riches in old verses. Tradition is, after

all, the living ideas of the dead, not the dead ideas of the living. “If you had the faith of a mustard seed you could tell that tree to get up and plant itself in the sea.” In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus goes further and says, “If you had the faith of a mustard seed you could move mountains!” A mustard seed was the smallest thing people back then could conceive of. Nothing was smaller than a mustard seed. What if we played with that word “Faith” not to mean what Luther meant, but what Peter Block means. Faith is in taking that risk as we envision the future. It is what sustains us in the unknown. The faith of a mustard seed, the smallest amount you can think of, allows us to say “yes” in the midst of “how.” The smallest amount of vision, of dreaming, of looking ahead, of taking that leap of faith, would allow us to move mountains or trees, or anything else. It allows us to be effective.

This is true especially of our church. Imagine if we had a group of people in our church whose primary job was to ask these “Yes” questions. They were the designated dreamers. Their role would be to cast a vision of what our church could and should be. Just imagine if you belonged to a church where there was a group of people who asked “What matters to us as a congregation of Unitarian Universalists in Wilmington Delaware?” “What would it look like if we were the church we imagine in our dreams?” What if they put off asking all those “How” questions—let another group worry about how to make it

happen. We are going to focus on our mission, our purpose, our reason for being here. We are going to look at what difference do we as a church make in the world? We will create some other group to make it happen—we will tell them what our dreams are, give them some guidance and set up some healthy boundaries and limits, but let them be creative and innovative with our church's resources. We are not going to micromanage the How. Of course the dreaming group would have to talk to this doing group; you can't completely divorce the two, obviously. They need to be in cooperation and dialogue.

Well I am happy to announce to you this morning that you already belong to that church. The Board of Trustees are the dreamers, and the Executive Team are the doers. Now I know that there are those of you out there who just cringed when I said the word "Executive Team." Sometimes our terms sound like we are running my Dad's old bank instead of a faith community. So let name all of the Pavlovian bells just so we can get them out there and own the power they may have over us. Terms like "Executive Team"; "Ends"; "Executive Limitations"; "Monitoring Reports" and the staff's favorite "Board Executive Team Linkages." This litany may sound esoteric and strange, and perhaps you would rather we not use them. I understand. Words are powerful symbols. But as Unitarian Universalists we are blessed with the ability to play with words and their meanings, and just because John Carver

uses a word that way doesn't mean we can't be playful and enjoy the full richness of them. Because when we get beyond these words, which are really just the skin of our shared leadership model, when you get down to the heart and soul of it all, it is about our mission; who we are as a congregation. We have all of these strange terms because they allow us to align our organization around our mission as a church—to ground our everyday work in our ultimate purpose, who we dream we might become as a congregation. It is the easiest possible way to stay connected to that purpose. The Board dreams, the Executive Team does, and we confer with each other once a month. Our conversations are not about which line item in the budget is too high or too low. It is about the stuff that matters: are we the church we dream we could be? How could we get there if we aren't? Incidentally, these conversations are posted in the Parish Hall and on our website if you are interested. There are no secrets here; just who are we and who could we become and what do we need to do to get there.

There is a story of two men building a brick wall. The architect of the building walks by and asks the first man what it is that he does all day. The worker replies, "I pick up a brick, and I spread some mortar. I lay the brick on the mortar and clean it up with my trowel. I do this hour after hour, for eight hours a day. Day after day for weeks at a time until this wall is built." The architect goes to the second man, who is also

laying bricks. He asks the second man, “What do you do all day?” The second man replies, “I am building a cathedral!” That is the faith of a mustard seed! To see beyond the efficient work of the present and grasp what the future may be. For the second worker is doing the exact same things as the first—he just sees that work in a different context, a wider context, that gives his work meaning and purpose. Let us strive to do the same. Let us not run to the “How”’s too quickly because the future makes us nervous. Let us remain focused on our vision, on who we are and the difference we make in the world. For in that work we will truly build a cathedral. Amen Blessed Be.