

## **Why Can't We Do That? The Irony of the Negative**

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

March 6, 2011

By Rev. Dr. Joshua Snyder

Zen Master Seung Sahn tells the story of a dog who was once in a race. Perhaps you are familiar with dog races. The dogs line up at one end of the track while a mechanical rabbit zips around the inner railing. The dogs' instinct of course is to chase this rabbit and to try and catch it. To the humans this is an opportunity to bet on the dog you think will win. To the dogs, it is simply another hunt for a very fast rabbit. Well one day our special Zen dog participated in one of these races. The dogs lined up, the rabbit took off, and the race began. The pack was about a quarter of the way around the track, when our dog stopped unexpectedly. He looked around and then took off in a new direction. Instead of following the rabbit around the track's perimeter, as all the other dogs were, this dog cut through the infield, and ran directly to the other side of the track. Sure enough, he reached the opposite side of the track at about the same time as the mechanical rabbit. The Zen dog pounced and successfully captured it.

These days, we need people, specifically leaders, who think like this dog does. His vision was clear: capture the rabbit. How he accomplished his goal, however, was highly creative and unique. Yet the people who set up this race, probably saw the outcome in very different terms than the dog did. To them it was a complete failure. This dog gets the rabbit, destroys it, and all the other dogs lend a hand. No one actually crossed the finish line. There is no winner of the race, and thus no winner of the bet. The “rules” of the race were not clearly defined for a dog to understand even though they were implicit in the minds of the spectators. There was an implied rule at play for those observing the race: chase the rabbit around the track and cross the finish line. Do not cut across the infield, even though that would accomplish the dog’s goal more effectively.

This is the constant balance that leaders face: be creative and innovative in accomplishing the mission and vision, but within limits. The ends do not justify the means. There are things that one should not do. The need for limitations on the power of our leaders is the moral of the story being playing out in the Middle East right now. Leaders like Mubarak and Qaddafi are tyrants who permitted no dissent or diversity of opinion much less a limitation on their power. Without such a limitation, they become in their own minds at least, omnipotent, like a God, and their egos go out of control. The rebellions and revolutions of the past month in countries throughout the region have been in support

of change—a new perspective, a new direction, and a greater voice for the people. Democracy is great not only because it provides for the people to have such a voice in selecting their leaders, but it is great because it limits the power of the executive. It says what that leader may NOT do. That limitation, placed in the negative, ironically makes the leader more effective than if it were not there, because it defines a boundary.

Dan Hotchkiss in our reading this morning takes this leadership principle found the context of politics into the context of the leadership of the congregation. It sounds peculiar to say what someone should NOT do, as opposed to what they should do. But telling our leaders exactly what they should do soon leads to micromanaging of the worst kind. It leaves no room for creative thought or ideas, no new programs or new people to help. The default setting for a church governing itself in such a manner is more of the same. Leaders feel stifled, and even worse, are not allowed to do the job expected of them. We tell the leader what to do, and they carry it out like some lackey. Between omnipotent tyrant, and congregational gopher there must be some middle ground.

Fortunately Hotchkiss lays out this middle ground. Stating what we DON'T want from our leaders does at least two crucial things. First it addresses areas where people might be worried or concerned. Money is often a source of concern for congregations and their Boards. So,

Hotchkiss encourages us to make explicit the fear you have. Write a policy that says, in essence, “The Executive will not overspend the budget.” Or with the building, “Don’t allow the building to fall into disrepair.” Framed in the negative, these policies get at the key areas of concern that church members have.

But you will notice that they also leave some room for a leader to work within. “Don’t overspend the budget” leaves room for the leader to take whatever action he or she wants to achieve the goal—just stay within the boundary. So the second thing that policies framed in the negative do is they clearly and explicitly define the boundaries of power. When you know what is not allowed, then you can clearly demonstrate that you have stayed within the boundaries. Or if you have gone outside those boundaries, then you can explain why and under what circumstances. The Board’s due diligence is followed, and the Executive knows what is expected of him or her.

The latter point is huge, especially in church. So often ministers and other leaders are frustrated by unspoken expectations, resistance to change, and “the way we have always done things.” Multiply these by two or three hundred members, and pretty soon leaders feel like they are in a straight jacket. Usually in order to start a new program or initiative in the church, weeks and months of politics and backroom negotiations are required for even the slightest movement forward. Of course very few of these unspoken expectations or “the way we have always done

things” are aligned around the mission and vision of the church. They are typically aligned around personal agendas. But clearly defined boundaries that say, “Don’t do X, Y or Z, but feel free to accomplish our goal through any other means your little head can think up.” That hits that sweet spot between giving leaders room to lead, and ensuring that they do not turn into dictators.

My favorite example of the use of the negative comes from Dr. Seuss. You are, I am sure, familiar with his story of the Cat in the Hat. How many of you remember not the book, but the cartoon that was made back in the seventies I believe? Dr. Seuss wrote the cartoon too, so it is not apocryphal. Of course he had to add in some more material than he had in the book, which is very brief. I am willing to bet that I have seen this cartoon much more recently than most of you; which practically every day since my son got the video for Valentine’s Day. At one point the cat loses his moss-covered three-handled family credenza while playing with the children, and has to have it back. It had been in his family for generations. So the children begin to look for it. But the cat has a better idea. To find the moss-covered three-handled family credenza he proposes a method of looking for it called *calculatus eliminatus*. Through this method he and the children run throughout the house and label, with a marker no less, all of the places where it is not. So the moss-covered three-handled family credenza is not on top of the TV, so they mark it “X24.” And it is not behind the couch, so they mark

the couch “3 million and twelve.” They go throughout the house marking all the places it is NOT, in very strange ways.

I cannot help but think of this cartoon whenever I am writing monitoring reports on policies framed in the negative. How do you demonstrate that you did NOT do something? It can be a pretty challenging mental exercise sometimes. In some ways the cartoon is a parody of policy governance. But to take Dr. Seuss seriously for a moment, what if there were some places around the house that the cat was really worried that his moss-covered three-handled family credenza might turn up; the garbage for example. Or perhaps laid out at the curb for anyone to come along and take. It might not be a bad idea to check those places precisely in order to make sure it is NOT there. In other words, labeling the whole house that way is silly, but some key places you are worried about would be responsible monitoring. Indeed, who cares if a moss-covered three-handled family credenza winds up in the living room or that corner as opposed to this one. It’s those key worry points or places that one needs to pay special attention to.

Actually *calculatus eliminatus* is a time honored method for theologians. They don’t call it that—they prefer the Greek instead the Cat in the Hat’s Latin. Theologians call this “apophatic theology” or *via negativa* or negative theology. Negative theology is the attempt to describe God by saying what God is not. It has usually been the preferred theology of mystics whose experience is beyond words.

Negative theology has been done by some Western mystics, but it is much more common in Eastern religions. In fact the most popular, and arguably the most influential, example of apophatic theology is our ancient reading this morning. The Hindus of course have their own word for it: *neti neti* which translates as “not this, not this.” It is from that line in the Upanishad “This Self is That which has been described as not this, not this.” God, or in the case of the Hindus Brahman, cannot be seen, smelled, tasted, touched, even spoken of or thought about. It is beyond such qualities and conditions that our minds and senses can directly perceive. Mystics don’t like the fact that theologian and others talk about directly God using language or discursive reasoning. They prefer the direct experience which transcends such things. They point to a God that would literally blow your mind. Be like the Cat in the Hat, they would say, negate everything you can name and label and what is left is God. Well, God and a moss-covered three-handled family credenza. The Hindus call this “Nirguna Brahman” “God without Conditions” and it is considered the highest and most subtle form of Hindu theology.

Theologians have been chasing after this apophatic God the mystics have been talking about for years. Paul Tillich called it the “Ground of All Being.” Alfred North Whitehead called it the “Subjective Aim of every Actual Occasion.” The Unitarian theologian Henry Nelson Wieman had a pretty good one. He called this God “The

Source of Creativity.” Any time you have a new thought, a new idea, a new way of doing something, that is a tangible experience of Wieman’s God. The universe is creative, and anytime we are creative, then we are following the dictates of the universe itself. This is also very close to the Jewish theologian and mystic, Martin Buber and his belief that we are to have an “I-Thou” relationship with the universe. In other words, God is creativity and intimacy.

Which puts Hotchkiss’ balance between limitations and creativity in a whole new light. What critics of policies written in the negative fail to realize is that they are looking at only one half of the equation. There are really two things at play: limitation and creativity. Yes we need to limit the power of the executive not only to make sure the worry points for us are covered but also to give the executive a clear sense of the boundaries within which they can operate. The other side of the equation may be the most important: to have a clear and compelling vision for our church, and a world transformed by our church, that the minister and other leaders can actively work toward. One side of the equation deals with the end result and the other, the negative side, deals with the means which should not be taken to get there.

Just think of me as that Zen dog running around the track trying to catch that rabbit. The rabbit is the vision, the end result, of a world transformed. The ultimate end is to catch the rabbit. But there are rules that the dog is not allowed to break, which need to be made known very

clearly. If you don't want me cutting across the infield to get the rabbit, then put up an interior wall. Because I am going to be as creative, as innovative, as bold, as unique, and as fast as that creative impulse in me will let me be. Creativity within the limits is the recipe for success. The dog in master Seung Shan's story was in touch with that creative force of being, if I may call it that. Really it has no name that we can speak of for it is without conditions and attributes. It is the life force itself that transcends our feeble minds and breaks all of our containers. Every leader needs to be in touch with that life force. Indeed, every person should be. Couple that energy with clear direction and boundaries on who does what and when, and you have some potent governance going on in your congregation.

So let us not be afraid of negative language. It can be freeing and empowering when placed in the appropriate context. Indeed, it may even be the *via negativa*, "the way of the negative" to a new experience of God. May it be so for us. Amen Blessed Be.