

We Make the Path
sermon preached at All Souls NYC - 31 December 2023

*"Please expedite our request.
We have only just noticed the world is ending."*

With those searing words I begin this sermon... wondering, as some of you might be, too, what can we possibly say today in the face of all that challenges us. On the cusp of a new year, we usually try to feel hopeful and resolute. After enduring the years of the pandemic, suffering losses and living with uncertainty, getting through the ongoing political turmoil besetting and threatening our democracy... and wars continuing to destroy the lives of thousands, displacing generations of people and unleashing horror... we may be forgiven for not feeling particularly hopeful. Indeed we require those "better angels" answer our prayers right quick. *There is so much pain in the world that it's hard to know what to do, and nearly impossible to see the way forward. What guides us? Where is our map?*

There's a book from a while back titled *"We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change"* by Myles Horton and Paulo Freire that I read many years ago in seminary. Horton was the founder of the Highlander Folk School (now Highlander Research and Education Center). And Freire was a Brazilian educational theorist.

The Highlander Folk School in Tennessee was founded in 1932, focused on organizing unemployed and working people. By the 1950's and 60's the Center had become an incubator of the anti-segregationist Civil Rights movement. By 1987, folks at Highlander were working for peace and justice through developing grassroots organizing and coalition building for progressive change.

With the intent of writing a book, Horton joined with Freire in a series of conversations. in an attempt to capture the essence of the historic work the school had done - and was still engaged in - at the intersection of education and social change.

Horton's approach was grounded in the small, local grassroots education model exemplified by Highlander, centered in the community and locating itself squarely outside the formal schooling systems in the United States. Freire's method was focused and rooted within the university and state-sponsored education programs of his native Brazil.

In their very different work locations and circumstances, they had come to similar conclusions: real liberation can only come through participatory education, where people learn and act together. But their starting points and their situations and communities were so very different.

To bring these divergent but similar philosophies together into one book seemed an impossible task. They began by engaging in a conversation without a firm agenda. They knew there were some theoretical educational issues they wanted to explore. There was at least the germ of an idea of what they wanted to get across. Somehow, though, they could not get started. They couldn't see a way to get where they thought they were headed, where they needed to be.

Have you ever been there - working on something where you have a vision of the end-point, but you're stuck almost at the starting line, unsure of what to do next?

Like many of us when faced with such a challenge, they started to make lists of what they needed to cover. And then tried to prioritize those lists. They kept at it, but they seemed no closer to their goal; no closer to that important conversation they both felt they needed to have in order to get their message across.

[here I'm imagining a room with every inch of wall space full of newsprint paper covered in words written in colored markers and littered with post-it notes...]

In what seems like a moment of frustration, Freire challenged Horton:

"Yes, everything you recognize as something important. I think that even though we need to have some outline, I am sure we make the road by walking."

I imagine that they needed to winnow lists of important objectives. If one was reluctant to let go of certain ideas, they could not get beyond that point to the work at hand. I've been there - no doubt you have too, where *everything that needs to be done* is something important that must be attended to. Everything. Each idea, each thought, each task, is so very important, and worthy and necessary. And now we may not be sure where to turn, what to do next. Choosing which and where and how proves daunting. We can't see the way ahead, at least not clearly. We may have a firm but still a little vague idea of where we want to go. And there are several important items that will need our attention. But we need a path to get us to that destination, our goal. No elected official or professional leader can give us the exact, perfect plan on how to get where we need to go. That is something we must do for ourselves as individuals - and also something we must do together.

"I think that even though we need to have some outline," Freire said "I am sure we make the road by walking."

This saying comes from the Spanish poet Antonio Machado. And it's as if he is speaking to us right now, just as his words called Horton and Friere out of their "writers' block". The words call us to brave the unknown... inviting us out of our boxed-in corners, out of impossible places and worrisome situations. Machado frames it this way in his poem:

Wayfarer, the only way is your footsteps,
there is no other.

Wayfarer, there is no way,
you make the way as you go.
As you go you make the way
and stopping to look behind,
you see the path that your feet will never travel again.
Wayfarer, there is no way -
only foam trails in the sea.

Wanderer, (another translation says) your footsteps are the road, and nothing more.

So when we get anxious about the way ahead, of all that has to be done, or when we will have answers, we may need to allow the path to reveal itself in our footsteps. In all things - issues or concerns at home, when we want our personal situations to be settled, mended or improved; or those ambitious communal goals of ensuring our social welfare - will they be agreed upon and met? It certainly might be helpful to know that as important as the endpoint may be, the road, the path is our focus.

What should we do? How will we get there? I do believe that the path becomes clearer as we begin taking these steps. It is important that we keep going - for our families and for our children, for our community and our world - even if we aren't totally sure.

But precisely which way is that road going?

Yes, yes, we are the ones making the way forward. It's all up to us. But I think there is more to consider as we venture forth. We don't want to trudge or stumble forward, unperceptive of anything around us, and inadvertently arrive in a thicket of brambles and thorns. Nor do we want to veer off onto separate paths hoping we will somehow all arrive at the same destination whether we go north or south or east or west or some combination of these cardinal directions. We need to be aware to notice what we encounter along the way... to take it all into account.

And we need to be comfortable with the ambiguity; to be willing to take the turns to keep moving forward, making progress sometimes, falling back at others. Perhaps we can even revel in the mystery that is before us, and enjoy the surprises along the way. To recognize that when we stumble, or fall, or make a turn that needs to be rethought - and we have to retrace our steps and start again - that in all this, we keep going, finding our way. And we need to keep faith with our companions on this journey.

We set out and make the way even if the path is not totally clear, even when there are obstacles we must remove, or maneuver around. To do this well means that we need several things, beyond a good compass. We need each other. We need to trust one another. We need to have a common understanding of where we are headed... and that the path may be quite different than we expect. And we will have to be okay with that.

And be aware that we may disagree on individual details about what we need to carry on this journey and how we ought to equip ourselves or about precisely where it is headed. Yet we will move out onto the path anyway.

Wayfarer, there is no way, you make the way as you go.

Another poet, David Whyte, wrote about the Camino de Santiago. His words about following that path echo this theme.

(from *Pilgrim: Poems* by David Whyte)

The road seen, then not seen, the hillside hiding
then revealing the way you should take,
the road dropping away from you
as if leaving you to walk
on thin air, then catching you,
holding you up,
when you thought you would fall,

And the way forward always in the end
the way that you followed,
the way that you came, the way that carried you
into your future, that brought you to this place,

no matter that it sometimes took your promise from you,
no matter that it always had to break
your heart along the way: the sense of having walked
from far inside yourself, out into the revelation,

to have risked yourself for something that seemed
to stand both inside you and far beyond you,
and that called you back in the end to the only road
you could follow, walking as you did, in your rags
of love and speaking in the voice that by night
became a prayer for safe arrival.

So that one day you realized
that what you wanted had already happened,
and long ago and in the dwelling place
in which you lived in before you began,

and that every step along the way, you had carried
the heart and the mind and the promise
that first set you off and then drew you on

and that, you were more marvelous in your
simple wish to find a way than the gilded roofs
of any destination you could reach...

Even if we just can't see the way forward... we know that there is something of great importance, something critical that must be dealt with, some great love that is calling us on. And so we set out, we try. Even if it seems way beyond our control or influence, and even though we may be unsure of the outcomes, and we see there are risks - as there surely are in any worthwhile endeavor - we set out, we try.

The path may not even lead to what we thought we wanted or needed. The wanderings are indirect routes to understanding and meaning even if nothing is clear or forthright. But no task can be completed or accomplished - no adventure or journey begun - unless we summon up the courage to start out.

Recall the *Reading* shared just moments ago, which petitioned our "better angels" to intervene and help us make our way? Reverend Dennison also imagines a response, and I'd like to share that with you now. It's a Letter **from** *Our Better Angels*.

Dear One,

We have received your letter
and we hate to tell you—
not hate so much, but are a bit afraid to say—
we cannot grant your requests as stated,
but can only remind you of familiar things:

First, faith.

Faith in yourself and trust in others.
We know it can be terrifying to be
vulnerable, but only when you
share your softest side will we be able
to break through.

Next, hope.

Hope is not an empty fairy tale.
It is the true story of all the times
human beings *like you* have
found a way to create the future,
though you didn't know how.

And of course, Love.

Love that demands you cherish

all people, not just your self and safety.
Love that is not satisfied until every
argument ends abruptly when one
child says, "That hurts."

There is so much to learn and relearn.
The world teaches you to be hard,
to negotiate and defend,
to avoid giving too much and to the wrong people.
There are no wrong people.
You also are not wrong,
and when you encounter
the poor, the broken,
the unhoused and unwelcome,
you are looking, if you pay attention,
at us,
(your better angels)
calling to you,
calling you to
answer your own prayers.
If you want to change the world,
first, be sure you are changing yourself.

Be tender. Be kind. Be at peace.
Be all the things you wish for.
Be your own better self.
It isn't without cost
But it will be free.

We go forward. Choices and decisions made, detours traveled. And being human, we look back. The path that was once invisible is revealed. The past behind us is instructive. When we look back, we may feel rueful - regretting some choices here and there. And we may feel justly proud of how and where we have come. We can feel encouraged to continue on, even as the path remains unclear, or becomes rockier and even dangerous. We might take heart from knowing how far we have come... what road, hills and valleys, rocky and smooth we have traveled.

We must remember that we really and truly are more marvelous in our simple wish to find a way - more marvelous than any goal or achievement.

And then we may notice something else about this road: we have not walked it alone.

Amen and blessed be.

Opening Reading - Letter to Our Better Angels
by Reverend Sean Parker Dennison

Dear Angels ,
it seems important to begin
by making it clear
that we are not talking
about celestial wing beings.
This letter is addressed instead
to our better selves,
the people we hope we will be
when necessary.

We might also note
that we more often excel
at our self appointed role
as advocate for the devil ,
a requisite position that is also,
if you ask us,
not literal but theoretical
and therefore
without consequence.

We are writing to let you know
that we feel your presence
insufficient and unpredictable
and when we inquire
about how to make you
more dependable ,
we are offended by and
opposed to the level
of accountability required.

We are hoping to make arrangements
for an increase in the percentage
of goodness and presence of
admirable qualities in ourselves
and in others (especially in others).

We respectfully request that this
come easily, and with immediate
delivery, a dependable warranty
and at no extra cost.

We would be even more pleased if
it could be arranged
for us to become better people
without needing to change
or to consider any needs but our own.
It would please us if our status
as *increasingly good* could be noted
in some way.
Perhaps a cookie? A badge?
A halo, so long as it is comfortable.

We hope you will consider our request
as soon as humanly possible,
not in Angel Time.
We have already waited a long time,
unaware of the seriousness of the situation,
the disrepair to our reputation.
Please expedite our request.
We have only just noticed
the world is ending.
Sincerely,
... ..

Sources:

Breaking and Blessing: Meditations by Sean Parker Dennison (Skinner House Books, UUA 2020)

Pilgrim - poems by David Whyte (Many Rivers Press, 2014)

Wayfarer, Your Footprints by Antonio Machado, (1875–1939)