

Billy Amoss: Reflections on Making A Hole in the Roof

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[Mark 2:1-12](#)

[Isaiah 43:18-21](#)

I would like to use the story of Jesus' cure of the paralytic to challenge us to reflect on experiences where the obstacles in the journey to becoming whole, to becoming authentic in the eyes of God, appear to be so great that all conventional modes of conduct are useless and only a radically unconventional course of action, something that on the surface would be preposterous, like making a hole in a roof, holds out any hope for us. I would like to look at what it is that impels us to take a radical course for the sake of our deepest needs, to leap, not knowing whether we will land safely or not, and at what holds us back. I will be talking about faith in action and how it relates to my work, not only because you have asked me to talk about the spiritual component of my work in the world, but also because this is an area of my life in which I spent many years holding back and shrinking from life; faith, when it finally became strong enough in me, made unconventional modes of operation in my work a necessity. In reality, of course, it is artificial not to relate faith to my personal life as well – my marriage, my friendships, my use of "leisure time." The need to grow and be whole is not limited to a particular side of one's life. The need claims the whole person. God wants all of us.

Let us go back to the story in Mark. Making a hole in the roof is risky business. It is certain to incur the wrath of the owner. You might fall through – or be arrested. At the very least, it is unreasonable. Nevertheless, the story says that the crowd gathered at the house in Capernaum where Jesus was preaching was so big that it was impossible for the four men carrying the paralytic to get the man to Jesus. I think the word "impossible" is the key. It means that there was nothing to be done, on the face of it. Nothing, that is, if one were limited to the normal set of options. Therefore, now the men have to make a choice. They could give up and try to catch Jesus another time. On the other hand, they could simply wait outside. Surely, Jesus would have to come out sometime. Nevertheless, to make a hole in the roof is a truly radical choice. It is so unexpected, so original, and so absurd. However, it works. What makes them do such a thing? Jesus recognizes the motivating force right away. "Seeing their faith," Mark tells us, "Jesus said to the paralytic, 'My child, your sins are forgiven'." Therefore, it was their faith that gave them the courage to risk appearing foolish or getting into serious trouble for the sake of healing the paralytic. In the name of life, the normal rules of conduct are broken.

But, what is the faith that so impresses Jesus?

Faith is mentioned repeatedly in the stories of Jesus healing the afflicted. Moreover, the lack of faith is associated with fear. Just before Jesus raises the daughter of one of the synagogue officials to life, he counsels the official, who is named Jairus, "Do not be afraid; only have faith." When he calms the raging storm on the Sea of Galilee at the pleading of his terrified disciples, he rebukes them for giving in to their fear and their lack of faith. Their fear allowed the storm to rage, not only outside of them, but within them as well. Jesus is teaching them that fear is an impediment to faith, and when it takes over, healing cannot occur, peace

cannot be attained.

Relating the Gospel to our own lives gives most of us pause. Who are we to take ourselves so seriously that we can relate our experiences to the participants on the great stage on which the life of Jesus was played out? It is much safer just to be part of the audience, watching and listening, at times attentively, at times not, coming and going as we please, and keeping at a safe distance for fear that getting too close may require more of us than we are prepared to give. But if we really pay attention to the meaning of faith in the Gospel and try to be as honest as we can with ourselves, we can see that faith springs from despair, from a hopelessness so profound that it frees us to ask for God's mercy with all our heart, with every fiber of our being. Moreover, this hopelessness, if it goes deep enough, is actually the point at which we can be truly courageous, because we have nothing left to lose. We have the courage – to make a hole in the roof, because to do otherwise would be a rejection of life.

My job has required me to make a number of holes in the roof. I had to make a hole just to get the job in the first place. What do I mean by that? I am the executive director of a small foundation that is trying to make a difference in the delivery of health care to children in Russia. How did I get this job? When I began, I had none of the standard qualifications for this kind of work. I knew nothing about child health care, had very limited administrative experience, and had never had anything to do with that great GODZILLA of non-profit work – fundraising. My resume would not have gotten me past the first cut for a job like this. I was in a shipping job that I loathed. I had spent many years in despair of finding work that was close to my heart. I wanted to change jobs, but I was not even able to imagine myself doing something that had meaning for me and that could bring me the satisfaction of being engaged in the world. It seemed that only the lucky ever really enjoyed their work. The rest of us were doomed to

endless drudgery. So, when I had the opportunity to go to Russia as part of a U.S. government team to help with the distribution of food and medicine, I seized upon it, because I had been interested in Russia for many years and the times, early 1992 just after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, were momentous. I returned after seven weeks in Russia with my appetite whetted for building on the work I had done helping children's hospitals. Back in Washington in my old loathsome job, I decided to volunteer my time to a small foundation started by Maestro Rostropovich, the great Russian cellist, to provide aid to children's hospitals in Russia. I was excited by this work and longed to make this my real work. After volunteering for a year and a half, it was clear to me that the foundation, which had no paid staff, needed a paid director. It also seemed clear that unless I stepped forward and asked for this job which did not exist – and the need for which was not at all clear to Maestro – I would just go on volunteering, and doing my other real job, and sinking back into that terrible place of being stuck that I knew so well. This is the point at which the despair of my stale and mechanical work life became linked with hope of a completely new kind of life. If I had not felt the despair of my situation so intensely, I would not have had the courage to believe that things really could change. Now this situation may not at first glance take on Biblical proportions. But what I am talking about is believing in that part of us that wants to be healed of the brokenness that comes of not living authentically, of not following our heart, of shrinking from the self whom God wants us to become, of hiding our real identity from the world – and from God. Moreover, I am talking about being awake, alert, and patient enough so that we can recognize and embrace the new when it springs forth. So I decided to risk making a fool of myself and asked for a meeting with Maestro Rostropovich and the Chairman of the Board of the Foundation to convince them that they needed to pay someone to run the Foundation, and that that someone was – me, that guy from the shipping company who didn't know

anything about child health care, foundations, or fundraising.

It was faith that gave me the courage to ask for what I needed. I had learned to pray while in Russia during my seven-week stint with the U.S. government. There I found myself worshipping at a Russian Orthodox Church regularly, moved by the intense spirituality that emanated from the worshippers and the unearthly beauty of the service. Back in the US, I began to pray daily, often at odd hours or occasions – at business meetings, while swimming at the Y, during tense family situations. I found that prayer was a powerful reminder that we are never alone in this world. That is the basis of faith. Therefore, so prayer and faith go hand in hand; the one cannot exist without the other.

The faith in God to provide what we desperately need in order to live life whole draws its power not only from our own relationship to God but also from the faith of those around us. If we are surrounded by unbelievers, our faith may be robbed of its power. We need the faith of others to sustain our own faith, and we need to believe as a community that each of us can do the extraordinary, or we risk doing each other great harm. I find it so telling that Jesus could work the most marvelous miracles, including calming a storm at sea and raising a dead girl to life, but when he returned home, he could not work any miracles, because his own people would not accept him. They refused to recognize anyone but the ordinary carpenter who had lived among them, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joset and Jude and Simon. Their lack of faith made Jesus an ordinary person, and, in fact, turned the world around them into an ordinary place – a world of two dimensions, without depth, a place where transformation is not possible. Who among us cannot relate to the draining of all color and excitement from life when we return home? So we need to believe in the power of faith to work extraordinary change, to make our dreams real, and this is something we can do for one another. You did this for me when I was yearning to live

into the dream of doing my work in Russia. It was after I had come back from Russia the first time and I was a volunteer at the foundation. I had been asked to travel to Russia to assist in making a needs assessment of a children's hospital in St. Petersburg. I knew that I could learn a lot about this work if I went, and that going on the trip would be crucial to my future effectiveness as a volunteer at the foundation, but I had no money for the trip. Then I turned to the Growing Edge Fund. Seekers believed in me and gave me the money to go. Among you I was not just someone stuck in an ordinary job, but a person with dreams that, if taken seriously, could be life changing.

When we are faced with great uncertainty, we can sustain our faith by drawing the community into our life. I find myself right now at another time of crisis in my work, a time of pursuing an unconventional course of action, of helping to make a hole in the roof because the normal rules of action have failed. Since this story is still unfolding and I do not yet know the outcome, I would like to bring you into it in the hope of receiving your blessing. That blessing will help my faith.

For nearly two years, our foundation has been working on finding a way to make it possible to vaccinate half-a-million children in Russia against infectious diseases that are reaching epidemic proportions. Last summer our foundation asked the United States Department of Agriculture for permission to sell donated surplus U.S. soybean oil in Russia so that we could use the proceeds to purchase enough vaccines to immunize those half-a-million children. The proposal met with great enthusiasm from USDA, but then politics intervened, and between the reports in the press about the laundering of money from Russia and the war in Chechnya, our proposal, along with all other proposals involving Russia, was put on hold indefinitely by an interagency committee chaired by the National Security Council. No amount of pleading on our part

had any effect. It became clear that the proposal was dead in the water, and those children were not going to be vaccinated in the near future.

What was to be done?

Yes, a hole had to be made in the roof, because we believed that what we were after was more important than following the rules. Maestro Rostropovich made a personal appeal to President Clinton, asking that for the sake of half-a-million children an exception be made that would allow the foundation to go forward with the vaccination program.

What will the President, or rather, the President's advisers decide? Will the answer be yes or no?

Will my faith be shaken if the rain comes through the hole that was made in the roof?

"Do not be afraid; only have faith," Jesus said to the synagogue official, who was told that his daughter had already died. Imagine that. Everyone says your child has died, and Jesus counsels faith.

May we help one another to grow strong in our faith, to be unafraid, to make a hole in the roof when we have to, in the name of life, in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ.