

“Crossing a Threshold” by Peter Bankson

October 5, 2014

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

I have come to a place in my journey that seems to reflect Paul’s experience in this week’s Epistle reading: “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.”

I find myself in a wondering how I can continue to mature (or grow old) in Seekers Church. What’s the question

Can I still be a part of Seekers when I am no longer part of the SLT?

What can I do to find clearer understanding of my emerging place in Seeker

How can I get some rest?

LOOKING AHEAD ... BY LOOKING BACK

Last March, when I turned 75, I realized that a month later I would observe my 25th anniversary as a member of our Servant Leadership Team. A third of my life! What difference, I wondered, might those milestones make, for me, or for anyone else?

Then, in April I went to Ghost Ranch with Marjory, who was leading a pilgrimage focused on the spirituality of aging. She invited us to focus on God’s Call and how, over a lifetime, it grows through several cycles – Identity, Work, Gift and Legacy. I could see how moving between those cycles was marked for me by “thresholds” representing major changes in my life: leaving home; retiring from the Army; leaving my role as partner in a small, creative software development company at

Synergy; leaving Communities In Schools and my role there as a bridge to federal programs. Different work called forth and honed different gifts.

Our work in the Arizona desert that week raised the idea that I might be facing another one of those thresholds. I began to ponder whether it might mark a transition in my life cycle from Gift to Legacy. I wondered whether a threshold like that would include stepping aside from my place on our SLT, and whether it would ever be possible for me to do that and still be part of this family of faith.

The other question that came into focus while I was at Ghost Ranch was a bit smaller: "How can I set down some "busyness" and still be useful, accepted?" That one cried out for some deeper discernment.

Those thoughts of mine brought up images of the Apostle Paul musing about his shifting relationship with Jesus: against, then toward, then for, then with. I don't usually identify much with the Apostle Paul, but this time there was something in his commitment that spoke to me.

This year I also have my triennial SLT review. Deborah and Sandra and Kevin have been very patient, waiting for me to discern where I am in my understanding of God's call on me as a member of our SLT. The timing of that review added to my sense of the importance of having time for discernment, but I couldn't seem to get focused enough to really reflect on my life at that deep level.

I needed to pause at the threshold, but I felt too busy.

PAUSING FOR DISCERNMENT ... FINDING CONFUSION

When I returned from Ghost Ranch, there just wasn't enough time to do much discernment. I did wonder whether we here at Seekers will be able to accept me once I step aside from my place on the SLT. The answer to that seemed pretty positive, if a bit theoretical. But I felt too busy to do more than wonder about it. We were getting ready for the Guatemala Pilgrimage and I couldn't see how to make time for discernment. I could tell that I needed to set down some of my burdens so I could think more deeply about larger issues, but

what?

I thought it might help me if I set myself some deadline, so I signed up to preach on the Sunday after we returned from the pilgrimage in July. I thought that a commitment to preach might help focus my attention so that by then I would have some insight on my two questions. But as we returned it felt clear to me that as a community we needed to share about the experience we had helping build the library building in Panamachavac, rather than have me take this time that Sunday to tell you what I had discerned. Because, in fact, I hadn't discerned much of anything beyond the deep awareness that I was too busy to do much discerning.

So I glanced at the upcoming lectionary and when I saw that the Epistle for this Sunday included Paul talking about running the race, I signed up. I figured that today might be a good time for me to talk about finishing the race. I was still running on auto-pilot, thinking that 75 plus 25 (my age and duration on the SLT) were somehow mystical markers of some hidden truth. (Do they "add up" to 100%?)

Somewhere along in there, probably while I was away on Matinicus with Marjory, helping the Matinicus church for a few Sundays, I took a fresh look at the two questions from Ghost Ranch and thought a bit about the second one, about setting down some stuff. Sitting on the parsonage porch, crocheting a wastebasket out of discarded lobster trap rope, I got the sense that if I could set down some of what I've been carrying I could probably push it along with less effort than it took to carry it. And it just might be easier for me to get help pushing things along if most of us were pushing the "stuff" rather than you pushing me while I tried to carry it.

But once again, when I got back home there was so much to do that I stayed on autopilot, moved on by my TO DO list. It was pretty clear that I was too busy to do much deep discerning.

For some time I've had the sense that I'm carrying so much that I can't be very responsive to anything, new and challenging, or old and familiar. You may have noticed some signs of this, that I seem more irritable; slower to respond;

more forgetful. Maybe, I thought, these are signs of senility. Some have suggested the possibility of sub-clinical depression. That may be true, but I've reached the point where I can see the need to set down the weight and make time for some renewal. The question is how to do it.

I can relate my sense of the weight of day-to-day burdens to the patterns of the Israelites trying to survive in the desert after escaping from Egypt. I can imagine that they felt pretty much overcommitted, and the commandments they received from God through Moses might have felt like a clarifying light, beacons for behavior akin to the pillars of smoke and fire that were their guidance as they made their way in the wilderness. Good rules, but with not much room (or need) for discerning something new.

I'll bet it wasn't easy for them to go on retreat while they were in the wilderness. Maybe that's one reason why it took them 40 years to find their way just over 200 miles through the unknown to the land that God had promised.

Last week, as I got around to really reading the Epistle for the week I'd chosen for sharing some thoughts about my commitment, I realized that this week's Epistle isn't what I thought it was. I thought I would be working with 2 Timothy 4:7:

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

That's a clear invitation to talk about something I still didn't feel really ready to claim: stepping aside from the SLT while asking you to continue to accept me as a Steward of Seekers Church.

No, this week's Epistle includes Philippians 3:12-14:

"I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

This sounds a lot more like a mid-course correction than

landing instructions. I took my earlier quick decision to preach today as a sign that it was OK to look at the second question from Ghost Ranch, the one that calls forth the line from Jesse's new hit CD: "Lay down your heavy burden. Come away and rest a while."

ON RETREAT

Last weekend at Dayspring felt like a retreat for me, although I did feel the responsibility for guiding our experience in the silence, our time apart together was a good reminder of how important it is to take time for discernment.

I invited those of us on retreat to spend some quiet time reflecting on a threshold we could see before us. I asked that we look at the process of passing through the "liminal space" that we encounter at a life threshold, and think about the kinds of companionship we might engage to help us cross to the other side. Liminal Space is a place where the border between rational and mystical becomes very thin. It's the place where we are much more likely to dream dreams, or see visions, or catch a glimpse of the realm of God that is totally unexpected. It's a place where I may well be close enough to the Realm of God that I can reach around the corner behind my back and touch it.

Richard Rohr has reflected a lot on this liminal space as a place of "strategic confusion" where I find myself. Here is an interesting introduction from the web site inaliminalspace.com:

One image I used was the boatman from "Siddartha" by Herman Hesse. The boatman is waiting at just the critical point to help Siddartha cross the river, and when they have crossed they part company so the boatman can be there for someone else.

I'm convinced that Jesus sent his followers out two-by-two for a very good reason – so that they could walk together through the liminal space where they can engage uncertainties of their new calls and not fall back into their old "either-or" thinking.

As I sat on the porch of the Lodge at Silent Retreat last week

reflecting on this, I knew that I needed a chance to live in this kind of liminal space. I needed to watch for my guides, MY boatman, as I continue to ponder the threshold I am looking across.

RECOMMITMENT

In an interesting way, my sojourn in liminal space fits nicely into our annual recommitment here at Seekers Church. In our preparation we invite each other to reflect on our commitment to this intentional Christian community, to take time to discern whether God's call is evolving in new directions. Annual recommitment is an uncommon practice for most churches, but for us it's an acknowledgement that as we grow and change, our understanding of God's call is likely to change as well, and the path of those changes leads through liminal space.

If you haven't completed your preparation for recommitment, this is the week for you to continue your discernment with your annual hour in the chapel before you sign the commitment book. We will have the book in the kitchen after worship today so you can sign it if you're ready.

My next step appeared quickly after the silent retreat. Last Monday I came up here for the SLT meeting that was on my schedule. After coordinating the agenda for the Stewards' meeting this evening and a deep and compassionate conversation about pastoral needs within the community, we had half an hour of good questions about my discernment concerning the SLT, or lack of it.

During that conversation Brenda raised the idea of a "fast." What would it be like, we wondered together, if I were to take a "fast" from those burdens that feel so heavy so I could give myself some Sabbath time to go deeper into my discernment of God's call on my life?

As we ended the SLT meeting I realized that I had met my boatmen – or actually, my "boatgals." Trish and Brenda and I are there together, at a place that might be a threshold for me, there to help me clarify my vision and find the solid rock beneath my feet as I step across the next threshold on my journey. We closed the meeting with our traditional blessing

from Anne Lamott. "Thank you, thank you THANK YOU; help me, Help Me, HELP ME; WOW!"

I'm in the process of identifying and describing some of the things that burden me. Here are some examples that I've recently identified well enough to consider setting down:

Tending our gallery downstairs. After serving for a decade as the "interim coordinator," I've handed that to Sandra, who has the lead. It feels good to be able to affirm her initiative and help push now and then when she lets me know she needs a hand.

Maintaining the front page of our web site, inviting or writing fresh articles with community news to share with the wider world.

Administering the back end of our web site, controlling access to the admin section and monitoring how all of us who have stepped up to maintain parts of the site are doing.

Maintaining the all-Seekers e-mail list.

Editing and reprinting the "Guide to Seekers Church," "Mission Group Guide," Seekers Brochure, Care pack handouts and other publications.

In truth, I enjoy doing most of these. The "burden" is actually more about my attitude than my actions. I tend to assume that if I see something that needs doing and no one else is tending to it, then it's up to me to pick it up. Actually, it's the criticism I load on myself when some need surfaces among us and I haven't **already** fixed it.

I don't know where my discernment will lead me. For the moment I think I need to fast from some of the self-identified responsibilities that feel so heavy. At some point I will need to step into the liminal space around that bigger question and search for a way to step aside from the SLT but hold onto a

place as an elder in this family of faith.

CLOSING

Here is one final image that was given me last weekend at Dayspring, an image of the pervasive power of persistent pressure. Beside the road between the parking lot and the Inn there is the large trunk of a tree that fell many hurricanes ago. The bark has weathered off to reveal the grain of the trunk. I was surprised to notice that the trunk has a uniform twist. The trunk, about two feet in diameter, makes a full rotation about every four feet! I think it must be that for the 100+ years of its life, the leaves of that tree were attracted to the sunlight every sunny day. And just as the blossom of a sunflower twists toward the sun each day, over all those years the leaves of that tree may have put pressure on the trunk every sunny day. But in the hard wood of the tree that steady pressure gave the tree a permanent twist. It isn't bad. In fact it's rather interesting. But it did change the nature of that tree. Had it been harvested it would have probably been better for sculpture than for flooring.

As I pondered that twisted trunk, I wondered how the persistent pressure of my sense of personal responsibility has put a twist in me.

So, I'll be working with Brenda and Trish to find some ways to claim a "discernment fast" for a while, so I can work with my SLT review team on the larger question of what will it mean for me to plan, when the time is right, to step aside from the SLT and still stay in the community, to cross the threshold from servant leader to active elder.

I'll close with the ending of this week's Psalm lection:

19:14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

Amen.