

Jeanne Marcus: The Genius of Seekers

Seekers Church

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The Genius of Seekers

During his [sermon last week](#), Peter spoke about the "angel" of Seekers. He was pointing to the active spirituality of a church community, a kind of invisible essence of the community as a whole; which becomes embodied in the individual persons who are part of that church. Angel and people become, essentially, the inner and outer aspects of the same reality.

Preparing for this sermon, I have been thinking about a very similar idea, but using a different word: I have been thinking about the genius of Seekers. Not in the sense of some extraordinary power of intellect or ability, which is how we usually use the word. [Though Seekers is ingenious in this sense, in many ways] But now I'm using the word in its other meaning: which is, the special characteristics or spirit of a people, a culture or an institution. A community's genius is that special flavor or essence that makes them what they are. It is the thing that makes them recognizable, that seems to be different about them. This genius, this special character or spirit, can be thought of as either an inborn nature, or a guiding spirit. It has the same sense of being the inner essence of a community that Peter meant, I think, when he used the word, "angel."

Last week, Peter also reminded us of Deborah's now-familiar wisdom "first we shape our space, then our space shapes us."

In thinking about Seekers' genius, I've wondered whether Deborah's insight might be adapted to a new use. Maybe, like space, so too with carefully-considered written statements: for example, a community's call, or something like "A Guide to Seekers Church." First, we shape our statements of discernment and intention about who we are and what we are about: and then, through time, our statements shape us.

During the summer, Marjory and I co-lead a class called "[Tuesdays@ Seekers](#)." The class was one of Learners and Teachers' responses to this important time of geographical and generational change in this community. In such times, it is often good to revisit our basic understandings, to spend some time re-calling and re-claiming the aspects of our lives that we have experienced as most essential. It was a drop-in class: some came once or twice, and some came almost every week. Each Tuesday from mid-June through mid-August, between 20 and 25 Seekers came together to spend time talking together, celebrating and exploring the genius of Seekers.

So that those who were coming on Tuesday could begin exploring ahead of time, we made handouts available the Sunday before. These handouts featured excerpts from Seekers' written documents, especially [A Guide to Seekers' Church](#) and [Mission Groups in Seekers Church](#). These are the core statements that this community originally formed around, and which we have carefully considered and shaped through our life together. Tuesdays@Seekers was our way of exploring how the statements we shaped have by now shaped and re-shaped us.

Besides Seekers' own words, we also included excerpts from other writings that have helped to shape or feed the genius of Seekers. Especially, we returned to Elizabeth O'Connor, whose work has tried to capture the genius of Church of the Savior, the tradition in which we locate ourselves. Her writings about call and gift, about mission groups and about the creative potentials that reside in the messiness of community remain both illuminating and challenging: I believe that it would be

difficult for someone to come to a complete understanding of Seekers without having spent some time with Elizabeth's writings.

Tuesday after Tuesday, in both large group and small groups, we reflected on our traditions, and asked ourselves questions: How much of Seekers' sense of itself can be understood only in scriptural terms? What does it really mean to be a gift-evoking and call-evoking community? What happens in a mission group that I can't get anywhere else? How is authority granted and exercised in this community-and to whom have we personally given authority? If Buddhists seeking enlightenment have a set of practices that they've learned help them get to that goal, are there, similarly, spiritual disciplines that are particular to a Christian community? What do we do when our life in community feels injurious-or when we are wrestling with anger, jealousy or greed?

As we tried to capture some of what had been spoken in small groups, we filled pages of newsprint with our insights and personal experiences, which have all been transcribed. These are our records of an 8-week conversation between our core documents and the lives that we have lived under them: a recording of the way that our words about ourselves, like our space, have come to shape us.

In [Learners and Teachers](#), and in at least one other mission group that I am aware of, the summer conversations have also been shaping our immediate life as a mission group. Our group has gone back to Seekers' core documents, to Gordon Cosby and Elizabeth O'Connor, and repeatedly asked, "What would it mean to take these statements seriously?"

For example: here are a couple of Seekers statements about the Seekers' call and about mission groups that have challenged us. The first is from the formal [Call of Seekers Church](#). It is a paragraph that has been less familiar to me than the sentence about our call to be church. It reads: "The Seekers

community sees itself called into Christ's ministry of deliverance from bondage to freedom in every personal and corporate expression. We recognize the value of each individual and seek to heal any wounds of discrimination inflicted by our society and church."

Here is what we say in the Introduction in Mission Groups in Seekers Church: "For us, mission groups carry the seeds of the destiny of humankind. The future depends on what happens in such groups and whether they are faithful to Christ. Without the living presence of Christ in the group, participants will not feel a sense of eternal significance."

These powerful statements, it seems to me, are our ways of putting the same post-Easter understandings that Jesus' followers had. We have come to see, as they saw, that there is important work awaiting us, that only we can do; both in ourselves and in the world. We see, as they saw, that the wisdom and healing power of Christ are available to us to help us do this work, if only we are open to receive it. Moreover, we know that living out this understanding is difficult or impossible to do alone: that we need a community of believers to help us do both the inner and the outer work.

I have now experienced life in a number of mission groups, and know there can be periods of mission group life that do not necessarily feel like they have eternal significance. Yet, these statements have the power to bring us back. They encourage us each to play our role in creating something new in our life and work together that has the ability to carry the seeds of the destiny of humankind.

Learners and Teachers' has been specifically wrestling with questions of gifts and roles. And here is some of what Seekers has said about the importance of gifts in the guide to Mission Groups at Seekers Church:

"The only way we can free anyone else to claim God's gift to

them and be uniquely themselves is to have some understanding and excitement about our own uniqueness. As long as any participant in a mission group does not feel that his or her gift is essential and making a contribution to living out the call of the group, there will be problems."

"Once the gift of each member has been discerned and confirmed, roles can be structured to allow each participant to give to the group from a position of authority. This allows authority within the group to be shared by all participants, and gives each person a position of leadership."

Gifts come before roles. We share authority at the point of gifts. Moreover, most importantly, we understand that the only way we can free each other to enter the realm of God and be who we were meant to be is to be real and serious in our work of naming gifts and sharing authority, and holding each other accountable.

I do not think any of us in the mission group thought we would be working on and off at this process for months. But doing it has been full of good things, not heavy at all. Those who are newer to the community have a clearer understanding of what this whole mission group/gift/authority thing is all about, and find it intriguing. A conversation we had one week seemed animated, but those of us there left without a sense of seeing things in the same way at all. But some weeks later, one person in that conversation told the mission group that through working with that conversation. She had come to a growing sense of a new gift in herself, and sensed a new way of wanting to make that gift available to the community.

We have not been in a hurry; we have not short-circuited the process by making it about filling a prescribed set of roles. We've returned to some questions more than once, encouraging and supporting each other in going further, taking more risks

in claiming our emerging gifts, our growing edges and how we want to be supported in developing the gifts we've named. It feels like Something Is Up-that this is a pregnant time, and who knows what it is that is waiting to be born. I feel blessed to be part of it.

These months of focusing attention on the genius of Seekers have left me with two sets of thoughts. The first arises from considering my personal journey. About 15 years ago, I was still living in Austin, Texas when I was led to Elizabeth O'Connor's books and went off to Wellspring for their orientation retreat. Like many a pilgrim before and after me, I felt that something important was happening with Church of the Savior; and finally I found my way to Seekers to stay at the end of 1995.

Drawn as I might have been by the promise of a strong spiritual community, ready to take a creative role in such a community I certainly was not. Inwardly, I came spiritually bedraggled and deflated. I was not very happy; I did not know myself to be creative; I was not at all clear about my true gifts – and even if I had had a sense of them, I would not have had the audacity to claim them in public. And I was stone-deaf when it came to call-and, as others have said before me, this is a hard thing for someone in such a call-centered community. So initially, it was not an easy fit.

So why do I feel so much more spiritually at home and at peace here now? What has happened over the years that has brought me to this day, deeply excited about this pregnant time in my mission group and this community? Elizabeth O'Connor's book, Eighth Day of Creation, points to the central importance of simply calling forth the gifts of others. Rich or poor, privileged or outcast, what brings life and healing to others is having someone care enough about us to call forth our gifts.

Does it turn out to be that simple? However, of course, it is

not simple at all. What is called for is to do the careful work of evoking the treasures of another's personality, to be the magic mirror that helps others observe themselves in all their giftedness, and to support their becoming the person they were meant to be. I had read the books, and knew the basic concept; but until I actually lived in a community that expressed the genius of evoking gifts, knowing the concepts did not help.

We'll be in Takoma soon: we're hoping that when we move to Carroll Street, many will find their way to us in our new home. It's a community in which we maybe are expecting to find people who already share our values, are self-aware, creative and committed to social justice; like some of our creative young people, they'll come ready to learn and work with our language of call and gift; and will move steadily toward making a commitment to being in this community.

But, I'm praying that people as bedraggled and unpromising as I have been will also find their way to Carroll Street. Part of the genius of Seekers is the ability we've shown for weaving a continuing design of those who come bedraggled in one way or another, and stay to feel at home and at peace. Maybe the only real call we have is to do that again and again, person by person, evoking gifts and supporting people as they come into themselves.

The second set of thoughts inspired by this attention to the genius of Seekers came first from listening to the members of the mission group naming their gifts and those of each other. What an incredible abundance of gifts, a profusion of gifts, the proverbial embarrassment of riches! If there were only half as many gifts among us, we would still have all we need. And I imagine the same is true in other mission groups as well. And I began to wonder: there has been an understanding in the Church of the Savior that the Holy Spirit is always drawing to us people with the gifts needed by a group to accomplish the work that we have been called to do. So might a

variation of this wisdom also be true— that an abundance of gifted people might indicate something, too? If the Spirit has brought so many gifted persons toward us, is it because the Spirit is about to be sounding a new call to be about a bigger work?

This abundance of strong, gifted people seems to be paralleled by an abundance of financial resources. Think about what we are doing in preparing to renovate Carroll Street. This little band had \$345,000 on hand to purchase the building outright. We have pledged \$240,000 in one-time gifts; and we plan to borrow the additional money we need from ourselves.

When I tell people outside Seekers what it is we are doing, it is almost incomprehensible to them. Granted, we are not home free: the final numbers are not in on our loans to ourselves, and it is possible that the payback period will present us with some moderate difficulties.

However, I look at this and wonder: what other amazing things are possible for us? What other things might the Spirit be cooking up for us, wanting to elicit from us? Like many of us, I have given some thought to whether we might be on the verge of hearing a corporate call.

Which is, of course, somewhat interesting, because part of the genius of Seekers has been that instead of having a corporate call, our genius has been to come together for weekly worship, and then to disperse to live out our Christian commitments individually in our families, workplaces, neighborhoods and places of citizenship.

That is one proposition we have always come back to when we are considering our way forward: that we have a call to be church. This sense of ourselves is an important part of the genius of Seekers that has shaped us.

Nevertheless, we are also a community that sees itself called into Christ's ministry of deliverance from bondage to freedom

in every personal and corporate expression; and we say we believe that the future may depend on what happens in small mission groups that are faithful to Christ.

One of the people who sometimes join us in the School of Christian Living has said to me, "You all have no idea of what you have here." What he means is that at this time in the life of American Christianity, there are so few churches that offer real support and guidance for a committed, inquiring Christian journey. What he also means is that people like himself, churched but still thirsty, very much long for what it is that can be found here.

We are moving forward into a time of much movement and change; maybe we will also find that we are moving into a paradoxical new understanding of our mission. It's possible that our commitment to the genius of being a church that disperses into the world is the very thing that moves us into a new sense of corporate mission. With all our abundance of riches-of experience, of gifted persons among us, of financial resources-maybe we are being called to live our genius in a larger way.

Wouldn't it be interesting to know ourselves to have a corporate mission to go public with how to be a church that disperses? Already there is talk among us of an urban retreat center. And there's also talk of a publication group that would both re-issue materials that have been already been important in shaping our self-understandings; and also develop and publish new materials that would continue our story. Both of these seem ways that we might embody a corporate call to make our genius for being church together more public and available. Maybe we, corporately, could commission some among us to take this understanding of how to be a church into the world in a new way.

So: what I've been trying to work with today has been our community's genius; about how Seekers' written understandings

about ourselves as a community, around which we originally came together, and which we have carefully crafted over the years, have then gone on to shape the continuing life of the community. At crucial points like ours now, when so many things are changing, our genius is like a compass, pointing out the way ahead by orienting us to our deepest values. It is a reliable guide, calling us back when we feel confused, giving us clues about the way to proceed into the future. First we shape our understandings of ourselves, then our understandings shape us.

Seekers' genius has brought us to this place of great abundance. So great, in fact, that it may indicate that we are being called to something new, to release ourselves and our gifts into the world in a new way. Maybe it's time for us as a community-shaped as we have been by our formal call, all our written statements, our informal understandings and the experience of our lives together-to see ourselves in a new way. Maybe it is the genius of Seekers itself, or, as Peter put it, the Angel of Seekers, that is putting it into our hearts to think about these things.

Actually, I do not know whether this is true or not. There's a lot more group discernment to do before we really know our future direction. However, I do know that paying attention to the genius of Seekers, both alone and especially as part of my mission group, has been something that has given me energy and a sense of direction. Moreover, that I thank God that I have come to this place, and have had the chance to live among people shaped by this genius.