

"Fear of Co-Piloting" by Brenda Seat

Seekers Church

Sermon for April 2, 2006

Brenda Seat

Fear of Co-Piloting

Good Morning,

At our Overnight Retreat, I was reminded of Erica Jong's book, *Fear of Flying*.

It was one of the first books I read after coming back to the U.S. for college. My English professor loved poetry and tried in every way possible to imbue us with this love as well. In the course of teaching us a poem, he referred to Erica Jong's book and on seeing some blank faces, including, mine, he recommended that we read it. This was heady stuff for a missionary kid who had not been keeping up with the ideas of sexual freedom and expression that were so integral to that book. I still remember reading the first few pages and being astonished and intrigued by her ideas about "zipless" f*****!

So anyway at the retreat, as I was listening to our conversations around trust and conflict, I couldn't help but compare what we were talking about with other churches that I have attended or visited. Some of these churches provide a

skilled and very large and diverse staff, which provide wonderful music, an uplifting sermon, a Sunday school that uses professional teachers trained in the spiritual development of children, and that has a hospitality staff that provides refreshments and coffee before, during and after the worship service. You can just attend and soak it all in. You can take what you want and never need to make a commitment to teach Sunday school or make coffee. They do not have clipboards that go around asking people to volunteer – it is provided and all you have to do is come and enjoy. I decided that there was something very “zipless” about that kind of church.

As I listened to us talk about trust and conflict, about how we want to **each** be considered a precious child of God, how we want to seek better ways to listen and be heard, I was so aware of what a different vision this is. We are asking of ourselves and of each other, as individual followers of Christ, to become interconnected and to work together to voice and hear our deepest longings and desires -the calls that God has laid on each of our hearts. We are committing to serve God and to serve each other. Jesus calls us saying; “If anyone is to serve me, they must follow me: where I am, there will my servant be.” (John 12: 26a)

This is not at all “zipless.”

As I sat there on retreat, I began to ask myself some questions, and I invite you to ask them of yourself as well.

Do I know what my deepest longing and desires are?

Within the context of Seekers or my faith community, do I have place where I can share those longings and desires?

Am I being challenged encouraged and supported in the process of bringing these deepest longings and desires to life?

Do I know the deepest longings and desires of the person sitting next to me?

Do I know whether in Seekers they have shared or have a place to share their deepest longing and desires?

Do I know whether or not they are being challenged, encouraged and supported in bringing to life their deepest longings and desires?

Think of a person within Seekers with whom you have the least in common, someone who at times you may struggle to see as a precious child of God. Do you know what their deepest longings and desires are?

Do you know if they have a place where they can or have named their deepest longings and desires?

Do you know whether they are being challenged supported and encouraged as they bring life to their deepest longings and

desires?

As I asked myself these questions, I began to see the enormity of what we are trying to be about. As we move ahead in our process of re-imagining our commitment to God and to each other, many questions are still open. How do we create a Body of Christ where we can hold all of our deepest longings and desires? How do we listen each other into speech? How do we make resources available to each other so that we have opportunities to listen and be heard? What do we do when our deepest longings and desires conflict with someone else's' deepest longings and desires?

It is comforting to know that the disciples who followed Jesus 24/7 were not always clear about how they were going to be of service to God, to each other, and to the world, either. I was struck, as I was reading the Book of Mark for the Mark class that I am taking in the School of Christian Living, how dependent the disciples were on Jesus; how little confidence they had that they could do the things that he told them that they could do. Moreover, I wonder, did they need to experience Jesus' physical absence before they could feel empowered? Was it because they could no longer depend on Jesus' presence that they finally began to move out in faith to fill the void that his physical absence left?

It was interesting to me how many times Sonya was mentioned during our retreat. In the life of our community, she held a powerful place, in some ways similar to what the disciples must have felt about Jesus. She was the one we turned to when things became uncertain. She was the one we turned to when we needed to hear our own story again. She was the one we turned to when we had interpersonal issues that were getting in the

way. Nevertheless, I wonder ... Did we fail Sonya and Manning by not being able to see the possibility of our own empowerment and to do for ourselves what she had done for us? Did they need to leave before we could even begin to feel empowered and move out in faith and fill the void that their physical absence left in the community? I am not sure, but it is certainly something to think about.

What I am sure of is that no matter how hard we try we are not going to get this right! This is messy business that we are about, and our humanity, the very thing that makes us so loved by God, gets in the way every time Jeremiah tells us that God finally had to change the covenant that God had made with her people, God had to make a covenant with them that they could not break- a covenant in which **God** fulfills both sides of the bargain.

This is the covenant I will establish I shall set my law within them, writing it on their hearts; I shall be their God and they shall be my peoplefor I shall forgive their wrongdoing, and their sin I shall call to mind no more ... I could no more spurn [them] for what they have done than anyone could measure the heavens above or fathom the depths of the earth beneath. (Jeremiah 31: 33-34, 37)

God's promised forgiveness makes it possible for us to think about starting and then starting again

A few weeks ago I was startled into awareness and consciousness of how much I needed to start again ... how my

deepest needs and desires was getting in the way of someone else's deepest need and desire. This is a rather embarrassing story for me, but I tell it because hopefully, it is a story we can all learn from ...

It is all about a chocolate fountain ...

As many of you know, at the reception we held to celebrate the completion of the renovations on this building and our move to this new place, we had a chocolate fountain at the reception. It was a flowing with rich dark chocolate and people were able to dip strawberries, cookies, and all kinds of things in it and enjoy. Many people that day, expressed amazement and delight at this outrageous treat!

It was for me, personally, a way of expressing my belief in the outrageous generosity and abundance of God and an invitation to share this generosity with all who come to our table.

Last year when it began time to think about our second anniversary in this place, [Celebration Circle](#) approached Koinonia about commemorating the event in some way and asked if we would be willing to provide coordination for food for the event. Because Koinonia was involved with Seekers' participation in the Fourth of July Parade, we were unable to provide much coordinating support, but we did make some offers of help, including the fact that I had contacted Cynthia about using her chocolate fountain, which she had said that we were more than welcome to use!

Koinonia heard back that the Celebration Circle would coordinate and plan and we heard that we did not need to worry about things, for which we were very grateful. Since I had asked Cynthia, however, if we could use her fountain, I thought I should close that loop and so I asked Celebration Circle again about the use of the chocolate fountain. This time I heard that several people were very uncomfortable with having a chocolate fountain at our first reception, and they felt that it was inappropriate to have it at this second one, and so Celebration Circle did not want to use it.

I was stunned! I talked to several people within Celebration Circle and Sandra[1] who was one who had some strong reservations about using the fountain, talked to me about her concerns.

She felt that a chocolate fountain could be seen as something contrary to our call and commitment as a church to be in solidarity with the poor. To her it was a symbol of wealth and decadence, not anything that she wanted us as a church to be associated. We had a short conversation about this and I said that I would talk to Cynthia about not needing to bring the fountain after all.

Something must have been apparent in my face or in my body language, because of our conversation because Deborah checked in with me later during the week. She said that Sandra was concerned that I was upset. I reassured them both that I was fine and that I was not upset with them.

Which was true, I was not upset with them, but I was hurt! I

just could not really articulate why. It was, after all, only a chocolate fountain, and if we did not use it, that was fine, and it was probably true that it was a rather decadent symbol of wealth, that was in direct conflict with our commitment to be in solidarity with the poor. (Not that I totally bought that way of looking at it, but intellectually I could see that you could make an argument for that point of view!)

Still it nagged at me ... Occasionally I would get a twinge, and have these long conversations with Sandra in my head. However, they were never anything I felt I could share with her, mostly because I knew that I was just trying to persuade her that I was right and she was wrong. That my vision of the chocolate fountain as a symbol of God's outrageous love and generosity for us was the right way to look at this after all, but somehow trying to persuade her of that, felt wrong to me. Therefore, things just went on ... However, as I look back now, I think I began to see some shifts within myself after this: I became more sensitive to whether or not what I was offering the community was enough, whether or not my gifts were wanted or neededI became uncertain

Then, at the March Stewards meeting, Marjory led us in a collage activity where we would draw or find a picture that would symbolize what we offer the community and then other stewards would add to your collage, pictures or symbols of what they see as your gifts to the community. It was one of those things that just are sprung on you, and without a lot of time to think, I began draw to draw ... A chocolate fountain!

Suddenly, I became aware of what all of my upset was about. That chocolate fountain was I. It held my vision of hospitality, it held my understanding of who God is; it held

for me my deepest longings and desires. Somehow, I had invested my whole being into a chocolate fountain.

Well, that is embarrassing, but there it is

Therefore, when Sandra came to me and said, you know chocolate fountains carry a lot of negative baggage for me and seem to be contrary to what we say we want to be about, I was hearing at some unconscious level, you are not good enough. Your gifts and what insights you offer this community are not useful or needed. This is, of course, not at all what Sandra said!

As I have been working on this sermon I became aware of what Sandra was really saying. She was voicing one of her deepest longings and desires; that we be a place and a community who really values those who have less and that we act in ways that constantly remind us that they are precious children of God, just as we are. That we be aware of the barriers that limit some from really enjoying the outrageous abundance that God created.

I am also aware that my identification with chocolate fountains needs to die. Sandra's comments are inviting me to think about ways of expressing my vision of hospitality and God's outrageous abundance in different ways.

Suddenly Jesus' teaching about the grain of wheat took on a completely new meaning for me. "In very truth I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls onto the ground and dies, it remains that and nothing more; but if it dies, it bears a rich

harvest.” (John 12:24)

Sandra, in ways that were truly unknown to you, and only because of God’s grace and love, you have been a servant to me. You have made me aware of the limitations of my images of hospitality and God’s outrageous grace and love. I also see how because of investing so much of myself in a chocolate fountain, I became easily shaken and un-centered from the very Love that was calling to me when that image alone was threatened.

And it is because we are both part of a community who is committed to Christ and to each other, and sees each other as a precious children of God, that this interaction even had a chance of making me wake up to what was really going on, to see this as an invitation to let something that was not serving me very well, and then to go and begin again.

What I also see now, is that both of these deepest longings and desires are true. It is an “and” rather than an “either/or.” Part of the challenge is how we make them both real in the life of this part of the Body of Christ.

So, this is the way that we can truly be servants of God, servants to each other and servants to the world, but only because Jesus said, “ ... where I am there will my servant be.”

So, how can I be a servant to you?

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[1] I want to thank Sandra for letting me tell this story, since in many ways it is her story as well! Her gracious willingness to trust me to tell this story and to use her name was truly humbling, and I am very grateful to her.