

“Think Again: Seeing Things Differently” by Peter Bankson

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Celebrating the Feast of the Epiphany

This Sunday we celebrate Epiphany, marking the coming of the Magi to visit the Messiah – the Promised One, the Christ-baby – bringing their adoration, and their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. It was for them a time of surprising insight, an unexpected opportunity to think again about many things they thought they knew. When they went to see Herod in Jerusalem, they expected to find the child there, in the royal nursery. But no one in town knew what they were talking about. It must have been a surprising time for Herod as well. Here were these royal messengers, arrived from across the Eastern desert, bearing riches for a new king that he had heard nothing about. He was caught in a serious contradiction. Who IS the King?

An “epiphany” is a sudden manifestation of the meaning of something; a sudden intuitive realization, a big “Aha!” Our worship theme for this season suggests that it’s an opportunity to re-think some tried-and-true understandings of the world we live in and the “we” who live in that world.

Think about the Gospel lesson for this week. Imagine the conversations among the Magi as they plodded through the snow, heading for Herod’s palace, only to discover that the king they knew would be there, wasn’t anywhere in sight. And as they reflected how their arrival troubled Herod and all Jerusalem, they could see clearly that it was time to think again, time to take their gifts with them and get out of town, following the star even farther.

An epiphany is a time of unexpected, sometimes uncomfortable, gifts, a time to be on the road like the magi, willing to try a different path toward the good news. And Epiphany can be a time when we see, suddenly, for the first time, what has been right in front of us, or buried within us, a time to recognize and welcome something new.

Unexpected gifts help us think again

The gifts the wise men brought, gold and frankincense and myrrh, were gifts fit for a king. They knew the customs of their day: when you go to a foreign land to visit the king, you’d better arrive with a gift or two (or three). And when

you realize that what you've brought doesn't seem to fit the occasion, it's time to think again.

Imagine how those three wise men must have felt as they rode into Bethlehem and found that their guiding star had stopped over a stable. Yes, there was a newborn baby in there. And, yes, the star said this was the place. But the camel caravan was carrying gold and spices, and what these folks needed was a hot meal and a warm place to spend the night!

The gifts that the wise men had carried all the way from Persia were unexpected for Mary and Joseph too. As we know the story, Mary had been given some signs that hers was no ordinary pregnancy. Before she conceived, the angel Gabriel told her that she would bear the Son of the Most High and name him Jesus. John the Baptizer had leapt in the womb when Mary arrived to visit his mother Elizabeth. But here they are, huddled in a stable with the newborn tucked into a feeding trough, and this elegant caravan appears, offering gifts of gold and precious spices. Those gifts were yet another unexpected affirmation, an affirmation that something new was happening. It was surely the beginning of an opportunity to think again, an opportunity that continues to this day.

Think about your own story for a minute. Can you remember a time when you received an unexpected gift, one that invited you – or compelled you – to think again?

As I thought about an unexpected gift, I remembered the last Stewards' meeting. That night, after Cynthia led us in some engaging holiday parlor games, she turned the meeting in a very different direction. One by one, the Stewards were invited to share their reflections about Trish's service as a member of our Servant Leadership Team. Cynthia's invitation was the first time I'd heard about this, and I didn't have anything written down to add to the sharing! Immediately my inner judge jumped up, criticizing me for ignoring, or not responding to the invitation. I tried to both listen to what others were saying AND rehearse something appropriate to offer when it was my turn, but I felt mortified.

Then, when the sharing about Trish got to Brenda, and she admitted that she hadn't heard about this exercise of thanksgiving either, I began to think again. Trish and Brenda and I were in this together, and the rest of the Stewards had conspired (successfully!) to prepare affirming and supportive thanks for each member of our SLT. As my turn came to be thanked, my guilt and shame were quickly replaced by embarrassed gratitude. In the almost 25 years I have served as a member of the staff team / SLT at Seekers Church, I have never been given that kind of affirmation. I thank you for that unexpected gift.

So how is this unexpected gift of gratitude helping us think again? In a response she prepared for the Stewards' meeting tonight, Brenda captured our thanks and shared a new idea, She called it "The Value of Gratitude:"

This year during a ritual in the December Stewards meeting Peter, Trish and I experienced a wonderful time of affirmation and received expressions of gratitude for what

SLT does. Each of us was touched and felt known and valued in some deep and profound ways. Thank you!
From this experience we have realized that expressing gratitude to others, by telling them that we notice and value who they are and what they do within the community is important and valuable for all of us and should not be overlooked. **So this year we hope that we can find new ways to incorporate expressions of gratitude into our life together and pass on this valuable gift that Stewards began!**

Unexpected gifts, TRULY unexpected gifts, can help nudge us out of our ruts. They can help us ponder the possibility that things may not be just exactly the way we've been thinking they are, that there may be room for change. And Epiphany might be a good season to think again about those changes.
Choosing a new path also helps us think again

The Gospel holds up another important element of an epiphany: changing our plans helps us think again. After their amazing encounter with Jesus and his parents, the Magi changed their plans. This week's Gospel reading ends:

And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Wise men. You can't get more "Think again!" than that. When was the last time you woke up with a dream in your mind and decided to change your life? I know more than a few people in 12-step programs who can name that date. I've even had the privilege of adding a blessing to a few anniversary chips that help some of you remember that life-changing date.

But, abandoning your plans isn't always easy. I spent a good bit of my life as a "professional planner." Just before I left active duty I was working on the 10-year plan for the American military presence in Europe. We knew we didn't know what the world would be like in ten years, but those of us who had been given the responsibility to think about the future thought it was important to share our limited knowledge with each other. We knew things would change, but planning helped us get to know each other.

At an earlier time I was the "long-range planner" for the 101st Airborne Division in Viet Nam, where "long range" was never more than about a month. But even under those tight time constraints, planning was important. We knew that our plans could never predict how the future would emerge, but we also had learned that the knowledge, and trust, that came from detailed planning made our responses to the unexpected a lot more likely to be collaborative rather than competitive. In most cases it isn't the plan, it's the process.

I think the Magi probably knew each other, pretty well. So, when they were confronted by the need to change their plans, they probably felt like they could trust each other. After all, being on the road together, walking beside your camel from Persia to Jerusalem gives you lots of opportunities to deepen your trust and reliance in your fellow Magi.

Learning to live and work together also means learning to live with contradictions. I'm sure that by the time they got to Jerusalem, the Magi had some well-grounded experience here.

For the Magi, the pilgrimage to Bethlehem was a paradox, a time when things that seemed like conflict were really two sides of the same coin.

A week or so ago, as I started reflecting on bringing the word this morning, Marjory suggested that I might find something useful in Parker Palmer's 1980 classic, "The Promise of Paradox." It was good advice (Why am I not surprised?)

"The Promise of Paradox" reminded me of how often things that look like conflicts or contradictions are, at a deeper level, differing views of the same thing. Parker Palmer reminds us of the difference between contradiction and paradox.

A contradiction (says the Oxford English Dictionary) is a statement containing elements logically at variance with one another. A paradox is a statement which seems self-contradictory but on investigation may prove to be essentially true.

In my simplistic view, a contradiction is "either/or" and a paradox is "both/and."

Choosing a new path may be one important payoff of living with paradox in community. As Parker Palmer observes:

When I think about the people with whom I have the deepest sense of community, I think of people who have been able to share with me their contradictions, their brokenness – thus allowing me to share mine. When we present ourselves to the world as smooth and seamless we allow each other no way in, no way into life together. But as we acknowledge and affirm that the cross is the shape of our lives, we open a space where community can occur. And in that empty space, in that solitude at the center of the cross, the One who created us whole makes us whole gain. (pg 54)

And later, this gem:

You don't think your way into a new kind of living: you live your way into a new kind of thinking. (pg 60)

It isn't the plan, it's the process that can help lead us to an epiphany, where seeing clearly the difference between contradiction and paradox, can help us think again.

Seeing clearly helps us think again

In our reflection paragraph for this season the Dalai Lama suggests that "[w]e need to embrace 'inner disarmament,' reducing our own emotions of suspicion, hatred and hostility toward our brothers and sisters." What do we need to see differently in order to shift from boxing gloves to bouquets, to practice that "inner discernment?" I think we need to see, clearly, where our own strongly held convictions are standing in the way of reducing our own prejudice. In this new year in the life of Seekers Church, we need to think again.

Sometimes it's hard to see how contradictions at one level are paradoxically alike at a different, deeper level. Here's a rather heady example, one that has divided the Church for centuries: Is the communion bread we are about to eat the actual flesh and blood of Jesus, or is it a symbol of the presence of Christ's Spirit in the lives of those who are on the Way with him? Are we people of the transubstantiation or the consubstantiation? Lives have been lost over this contradiction.

But at a different level, the contradiction becomes a paradox: if you see the bread and wine as flesh and blood, and I see them as the symbol of Christ in the flesh here and now, we may feel divided. But if as we gather around the table we know we are all and each part of the Body of Christ we can understand that we are one in the Spirit.. As Deborah often reminds us when we share the bread and cup, "You are what you eat: the Body of Christ." The challenge can be finding a path to get to the level where both parties can see the truth of "both/and." As I thought about this idea and how to find a way forward, I came back to the class Keith Seat led last Spring on "Difficult Conversations." He helped us learn and practice using some conversational tools that can help us navigate the often thorny thickets of interpersonal differences that lead to alienation, and help us get back on the rocky road to reconciliation.

Through the class, I began to see that my disagreements were often more like paradoxes. That is, the elements of a disagreement are often not just the way I see the facts, but also differences in how I feel about the facts and how those facts and feelings affect my sense of identity. Working through the class I could see more clearly that when I am confronted by someone who is afraid and excited, I receive their fear as criticism of my inability to solve their problem. Often, that's not what they have in mind. But when I get afraid and agitated, I get lost in my own inner turmoil because my self-identity, as a capable, helpful person, is being challenged.

In frustrating situations like this both of us can justify our emotions of suspicion, hatred and hostility toward our brothers and sisters. But these feelings seem to be a lot easier to see in the "other" than in me. All the judgment and "righteous" indignation seems to be out there rather than in here. But, in fact, it's everywhere. I have it in me, as one of my favorite Robert Frost poems declares, "I have it in me, so much nearer home, to scare myself with my own desert places."

When someone tells me, "in no uncertain terms," that I am worthless or incapable of doing anything helpful, I feel that righteous indignation rising up inside me. My inner critic picks up the charge and I'm suddenly locked in contention with myself. After all, my identity is the good Boy Scout – trustworthy, helpful and all those other things. If I'm being unhelpful or unkind, who am I? There's an old Boy Scout joke that opens the window to an epiphany here. It involves a boy scout who is out to do his good turn for the day and escorts a little old lady across the street, even as she tries to decline his help. Safely across, he bids her farewell, and she turns back into the crosswalk. Her path was on the other side of the street.

When I find myself in one of those situations where it feels like being rejected by someone who needs help, a kind of help I think I could provide, it's pretty easy to realize that I'm not seeing very clearly. It's a paradox. She's right; I'm right; we're different. When I can see that clearly, I might

be able to think again.

My recent "unexpected gifts" have mostly been grounded here in this community. They have opened a door on shifting from "doing" to "listening." I am increasingly aware that my contributions here may well be more helpful as efforts to help you know that you've been heard, than to fix what you tell me needs fixing. Sometimes it's a struggle, but I'm getting the point that my personal identity is not quite so necessarily tied to helping little old ladies cross streets they do not want to cross.

Oh, I still wake up to find myself on the roof on Christmas Eve helping the repairmen, not the reindeer. But I'm pleased to report that it feels like I'm beginning to see options for listening in a caring way, rather than automatically jumping in with a pair of pliers or a printer.

From all this, it looks to me like progress often emerges out of paradox, but only if I can see and stay present to both sides of the question. Sometimes this is easier to see when the tension is between "him and you." It's a bit more challenging where it's between "me and you," and that's where Keith's class on Difficult Conversations was helpful. But this learning conversation is really challenging when the contradiction (or the paradox) is between me and me – "Inner me the Boy Scout and Inner Me the Old White Male." It's a big challenge for me to see when I'm fighting with myself.

When I'm all alone, and all wrought up it isn't easy to think again. But that's the point. If we're going to learn to think again, to practice "inner disarmament," we'll need help. We need some place where we can experience God's love AND be accountable for our own awakening. That's the sort of spiritual practice that is often part of spiritual companionship.

In surprising ways, when I know someone is walking beside me as I try to think differently, I have different thoughts! One of the keys to 12-step programs is the knowledge that our inner discernment, thinking differently and growth will be more productive when we know we're not alone. Seeing clearly helps us think again, and that opens the door to healing and growth.

CLOSING

As one very small part of the Body of Christ, we have a precious opportunity: We can choose to live differently, to risk sharing our paradoxical selves with each other in many different ways. Epiphany is a time of unexpected gifts, gifts that can help us think again. And, that fresh thinking can help us find the road less traveled, where we can be on the Way together. As we choose to walk a different path, this season can be a time when we suddenly see what has been right in front of us for a long time, when we may be able to "think again." I'm beginning to understand that, if I can just stay open to the mystery of Creation, and live into the tension of paradox, where "both and" is the nature of life, then love, compassion, and hope will be revealed in the most unexpected circumstances.

I give thanks that we are on the Way together, that we can

help each other learn from the unexpected gifts we receive and share, that we can choose new paths into the future, and that seeing clearly helps us think again ... and again.

Let us join our hearts around this table of thanksgiving and forgiveness, with prayers to help us embrace "inner disarmament, and let go of our suspicion, hatred and hostility toward our brothers and sisters.

Amen.