

**“The Spirit of Adventure” by Rev. Barbara Merritt  
The Worship Service of September 7, 2008**

FIRST READING

— *from Psalm 46*

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be shaken, and though the mountains plunge into the depths of the sea; though the waters roar and are troubled, though the mountains shake with the surging water.

There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God. God is in its midst.

God shall help her, at the break of dawn. The God of Jacob is our refuge.

He will make wars to cease to the end of the earth. He breaks the bow, and cuts the spear in sunder.

Be still, and know that I am God.”

SECOND READING

*-from “A Failure of Nerve” by Edwin Friedman*

The *Nuremberg Chronicle* of 1493 describes Europe as depressed. It described a civilization with little vision or hope. Referring to what they called “the calamity of our time,” the publishers actually left several pages blank so that readers could record “the rest of the events until the end of the world.”

Contributing to the general malaise was a combination of political, social, economic, and theological “downers.” Late fifteenth-century Europe, despite its glorious cathedrals, emerging artists, and developing network of universities, was a society living in the wake of the plagues, the breakdown of the feudal order, and the increasing inability of an often hypocritical and corrupt church’s capacity to ring true.

There had not been a major scientific discovery for a thousand years. Then, as if suddenly, Europe is all agog. The depression lifts like a morning mist, novelty begins to shine everywhere, and the seeds of the Renaissance that had been germinating here and there for two hundred years sprout vigorously. The imaginative gridlock that had largely beclouded Europe’s inventiveness for more than a millennium dissolves forever.

Europe’s imaginative capacity was unleashed not by the discovery of learning, as those with a vested interest in learning would have it, but by the discovery of the new world. The effect of America’s discovery on the European imagination was as though God had been hiding a piece of land bigger than the known world since the dawn of creation. The qualities of bold and adventurous leadership that enabled Europe to escape its doldrums are exactly the leadership qualities necessary for breaking the imaginative gridlock of our civilization today. The spirit of adventure must triumph over the concern for safety and certainty...

Prince Henry the Navigator was, perhaps, the first to fund research. Taking advantage of recent developments in technology, such as new rigging of sails, revised construction of ship

hulls, and more refined instruments of navigation. Prince Henry began to send expeditions down the west coast of Africa.

As a result of Prince Henry's efforts, Portuguese mariners made a new landfall further south down the west coast of Africa, including the crossing of the equator and the rounding of the Cape. To appreciate the boldness of this venture and the fears that had to be overcome, it is important to realize that the distance from Iberia to the southern tip of Africa is double the distance that had to be traversed to cross the great blue sea to America. The east-west bulge of Africa is almost one thousand miles long; as one approaches the equator the North Star appears to sink into the sea (perhaps the origin of the myth that here lies the end of the world); and there is strangeness everywhere. Around Cape Bojadar at the edge of the Sahara, the red sand turns the water blood red for miles. Much further down the coast, the enormous rush of the Congo River's descent creates a condition where the surface of the Atlantic is sweet for almost fifteen miles out.

Prince Henry inspired an expedition to cross the equator, and instead of falling off the end of the Earth, everyone came back to tell their tale. The breaking of this emotional barrier was similar in what it unleashed to breaking the sound barrier, the four minute mile, or the shift to government by compact rather than divine right..."

*"The Spirit of Adventure" by Rev. Barbara Merritt*

Ed Friedman loved to tell stories. Here is one:

"On the third day of Creation, just before all forms of life were about to multiply, the Holy One said to his creatures:

*I see that what some of you treasure most is survival, while what others yearn for most is adventure. So I will give you each a choice. If what you want most is stability, then I will give you the power to regenerate any part you lose, but you must stay rooted where you grow. If, on the other hand, you prefer mobility, you also may have your wish, but you will be more at risk. For then I will not give you the ability to regain your previous form.*

Those that chose stability we call trees, and those that chose opportunity became animals."

So, seeing only human beings in attendance this morning, I'll say, "Welcome adventurers! Welcome to all of you who chose risk and mobility and opportunity and moving forward on uncharted seas."

The problem is that most of us don't describe ourselves as explorers and adventurers and great risk-takers. We assume that the *Starship Enterprise* is the vehicle that goes "boldly where no one has ever gone before," not us. We go to the movies and watch TV if we want to see excitement and high risk games and heroic expeditions.

Most of us are more conscious of seeking stability, security and happiness. Most of us have fairly well-established routines. We can remember engaging in some pretty high-risk behavior when we were teenagers (even though we're in anguish when our own teenagers do the same.) But we're now adults: more mature — trying to get along, hoping that our lives might go a little more smoothly and serenely.

To which Ed Friedman says, "Think again!" His recent book, published posthumously, is a stunning reframing of not only the problems of leadership in hospitals, corporations, religious organizations and families, but I believe it also asks each of us to re-examine our spiritual assumptions. This rabbi, family therapist and consultant to NATO forces and to universities doesn't have every thing figured out, or have the secret formula for turning around the management of a failing institution. In truth, I think he gets quite a lot wrong.

But its what I think he gets right that fascinates me. He was a genius, a truly original thinker. And he offers a new and bracing paradigm with which to understand our existence here on earth. His thesis is that what makes great leaders is also what makes healthy families. What allows individuals to thrive and grow is also what allows nations to thrive and grow. After decades of experience working with families, and churches, and synagogues, and hospital boards, and government bureaucracies, and multi-billion dollar corporations, he kept seeing that there was something about what *health* looked like that had a common denomination in all the various forms and institutions. It turns out to be a kind of courage. He calls it nerve or the spirit of adventure, and the capacity to develop one's individuality and integrity.

I offer to you a brief summary of what I perceive to be Friedman's top ten characteristics of what health (in the largest sense of the term) looked like.

- 1) A healthy sense of **adventure** — where you remain open to new un-thought-of possibilities where you're curious about what unknowns lie ahead, where you are willing to try things you've never tried before.
- 2) **Self-differentiation** — you know where you, as a person, end and where another human being begins. This is more than a strong sense of yourself as a unique child of God. He states that in his extensive work with families, the greatest gift a mother or father can give their children is when the parents have made the children least important to the parent's own sense of salvation. In other words, Friedman defines this kind of maturity as a willingness to take responsibility for one's own emotional well-being and destiny.
- 3) Which leads us directly to the third quality of leadership and health — the **least amount of blaming**. Life, at its best, is actually not about finding out what is wrong with your co-worker, or your parents, or your community. The active, effective leader is always taking personal responsibility to improve whatever circumstances arise.
- 4) That is possible because of the fourth quality — **vision** — the capacity to see, not only new ideas and new concepts, but Friedman claims that vision is actually an emotional phenomena. When everyone else seems to be screaming at you, "*Don't board the ship! The equator is the end of the world; you won't be able to function in anything else but in the way but in the way we've always done it before*" — a leader sees farther than the known horizon.
- 5) A fifth quality is an appreciation for the **serendipitous** — for the unexplained and the unexpected gift. Friedman is especially eloquent that when the explorers first discovered America they were quite focused on finding the silks and the riches of the Near East. It never occurred to most of them that what they found in America might be more significant, more important. Columbus died believing that he had landed, not on a new continent, but in Japan. Serendipity, Friedman says, is the best antidote for anyone that assumes we know everything already.
- 6) A **growth response to challenge**. Challenges are not the enemy, or a sign of defeat, or impenetrable obstacles. They are merely problems to engage in and solve.
- 7) **Playfulness**. If you're not having fun, you're likely to run out of energy. . .and become paralyzed by your own fears. This concept of staying "non-anxious" is one of Friedman's great contributions to leadership theory. Life is definitely going to change. Learn to move with some playfulness. Don't be afraid of mistakes. Don't forget your own resiliency.
- 8) Work with **what is strong** in you and others. Don't get manipulated and sabotaged by the weak, by the victims, by those highly reactive, sensitive individuals who are more than willing to take you on as a hostage. This requires some explanation. He uses a football metaphor. If you are trying to move the ball down the field, a strong and winning team ought not to give all its attention to the complaints of the coddled, pampered athlete.

So Friedman quotes a football coach:

"When I coach, if receivers complain that the quarterback throws the ball too hard, I don't go to the quarterback and tell him to let up. I tell him to throw it as hard as he can, and I then tell the receivers they had better hang on to his passes if they want to hang on to the team. If those who cover punts complain that the punter kicks it too far, I don't go to the punter and tell him not to kick it so far. I tell the punter to

kick it as far as he can, and I'll try to find players who can get down the field and cover his kicks."

What is obvious in football may not be so obvious in your family. Friedman tells us that there will always be those individuals and families and systems that are "a panic, in search of a trigger."

- 9) **Stamina.** Friedman says that life isn't about quick fixes and fast solutions. You have to be willing to stick around, and to stay close and keep at it. He offers two examples of how we've lost sight of the stamina required.

"The most pernicious violence on television is actually in the story line — how the simplistic concept of human struggles 'does violence' to the nature of life. The most insidious message that children — and adults — get from the average television program is the notion that motivation is singular, that all questions have answers, that justice always triumphs, that love conquers all and that life is unambiguous."

And his second example, (I'm a bit sheepish to admit) I've fallen into personally. It happens once every four years. He writes:

"There is a collective irresponsibility on the voters seeking magical, quick-fix answers to a complex range of the problems of existence. Instead of focusing on their own response to the challenges of change, those voters find fault in their political stars."

Stamina to the contrary, means you keep working even in the face of rejection and resistance. He claims if you're actually trying to change the status-quo, sabotage and push back is a sign you are doing something effective. He writes that, "No one ever moved from slavery to freedom with the slaveholders cheering them on." There will be hardships and setbacks. Expect them. Keep going.

- 10) It is Friedman's tenth principal that I find most challenging. He says, "To be an effective leader (or a good partner or a good disciple), there must be **a willingness to be exposed and vulnerable**. If you are going to cover new territory, you're going to have to stand out front. You're going to have to cross the equator. He said that not only must you not be afraid of taking up that posture, you must learn to love it.

You won't find a religious tradition anywhere that teaches that this kind of courage is not essential in the life of the spirit. The Psalmist claims that even though the earth shakes, and the mountains tremble, and one hurricane after another brings along its surging waters to our shores, we must not be fearful.

Jesus promises that if you want to follow his teachings, you will discover that even though the birds of the air have been given nests and refuges and places to rest for the night, you, as his follower, will find nowhere to lay your head.

The Buddhist teaching is clear. As Joko Beck writes, "Life is a series of endless disappointments and it is wonderful, just because it doesn't give us what we want. To go down this path takes courage."

Rumi says, "You whose fear makes you incapable of climbing this small hill on your path; there are a hundred thousand mountains in front of you. Begin now!"

But, if you are like me and not especially gifted with courage, you'll have to ask, "Why do I have to cross the equator? We've already figured out what's on the other side of the globe! There are no new worlds to discover in my time. Just a few blank pages left to fill in at the back of the book. Just a few more years. I just need to get my kids through school or get to retirement or figure out how to survive at work."

These voices in our heads! Strong in the 1400's. Strong in the 21st century. They sing, "there are no new worlds left to discover!" Allow me to mention three. One in the world. One in this community of Worcester and one in yourself.

*In the world* — global warming. This is a challenge we have to meet. We have to figure out how to reduce our excessive and wasteful consumption. We have to find a way to co-operate globally. We have to take responsibility, corporately and individually. As Friedman says, "This is not about finding the right answers, right now. It is about asking the right questions" New questions — new frameworks — a whole new world — understanding to develop.

*In the community.* One thing we know, poverty is increasing in Worcester. Our neighbors are in trouble. This church, with Jericho Road and other volunteer opportunities, is always asking (and will always be asking): “How can we use our real strengths to bless the world? How can we be more effective as an agency of change?” Again, what are the new questions we haven’t asked ourselves before, that might make a real difference?

*And in our own hearts and minds and souls.* Spirituality is not about finding a cozy, safe religious community where all your troubles will disappear and life will finally become predictable, comforting and soothing. (I can see, even now, how some of you might be figuring out how to make a swift exit out of the back of the sanctuary.)

No, Annie Dillard is correct in that if the church is teaching what the church ought to be teaching, you ought to be wearing a motorcycle helmet when you come to the sanctuary. Because, like it or not, life is an adventure. And you will be asked to cross what looks like the end of the world — over and over again. With the death of those you love, with the changes in work and health and family. With raging oceans and trembling mountains.

Where I find Friedman most helpful is when he tells me what is blocking my passage into new worlds. What are the habits that can get me in the most trouble when I go forth onto any number of adventures? For some reason, I find Unitarians to be especially susceptible to at least three myths that can keep you stuck.

The first myth is that what is missing is more data, better techniques and new information. Friedman claims that this obsession with gathering data, this unending treadmill of trying harder to gather facts and interpretations and research, is more often than not, an avoidance of emotional risk-taking, and decisiveness, and responsibility that will result in transformation and empowerment.

The second myth (and this one really hurts) is the belief that “toxic forces can be regulated through reasonableness, love, insight, role modeling, inculcating of values, and striving for consensus through empathy, team building and camaraderie.” Ouch! Friedman says that the only way to meet destructive and fearful forces is with strength, integrity and courage. Moses was never going to convince Pharaoh with data, reasonableness or team building. He had to actually lead his people out into the wilderness. It was a dangerous and difficult journey to their freedom.

Finally, Friedman warns us that this quick fix mentality that we are so fond of (that seeks “symptom relief, rather than fundamental change”) will not serve us well. Think 40 years in the desert. Think of the 223 years that First Unitarian in Worcester has been trying to create a spiritually liberating community. Think of a lifetime of seeking to reach God and truth and reality. Come to church not to find the answers. Try to leave here asking better questions.

I’ve never heard better ones than those Micah asked:

*“What does the Lord require of thee —  
but to do justly?  
and to love mercy?  
and to walk humbly with thy God?”*

Who knows what new possibilities lie beyond our sight and current understanding? Who knows what strength will be required of us the days ahead? All I hope is that you never lose sight of your own great courage. And that you never forget what a tremendous adventure your life has been and can continue to be. May you discover, again and again, the courage to overcome all the barriers and blockades and “ends of the world” that you encounter on your own surprising and glorious journey.