

“Raise the Roof Beams!”

Sunday, May 23, 2010

Rev. Chip Wright

The title for this morning’s sermon, “Raise the Roof Beams!” as some of you may know comes from a piece of our history here in the United States. It was a holler or call used to gather families together for barn raisings. “We raise the roof beams on Saturday!” would be the call from the mercantile, the stables and blacksmith shop even to the tavern through the week. And on Saturday there would be many able hands, tools, drink and food arriving at the site, everyone ready to join in the effort, community at its best, and something that still happens in Amish and other Anabaptist communities and even geodesic dome raisings throughout the United States. And often at these times, be they a day or more they would end with celebrations and laughter, singing and dancing.

This kind of cooperation is not unique to we European and African stock here in the United States. In fact it is a custom and often a ritual in human communities everywhere reaching as far back into our collective past as we can see. All throughout history there have been great achievements by organized groups of people, impossible jobs to do alone, carried out by folks coming together and focusing on common tasks: the Pyramid at Gaza, the Taj Mahal, the Mars landing craft and buggy. There is a power and potential inherent in coming and working together that no other human activity can manifest.

On the other hand, there have been equally terrible things done by people called to assemble and act in a common way, things that continue to happen today and reach back into the dim light of history. A lynch mob comes to mind, the Crusades, a head hunting raid in the jungles of New Guinea, our war in Iraq, just to name some examples.

Both these good and bad actions have a common connection with another trait of our species: the power that we have to manipulate or direct not just the physical context in which we live but the thinking of large groups in significant ways. This ability of the human being to manipulate is without match in the animal kingdom.

Our species has refined this skill so well that that which is being manipulated seems not even to know. Like our domestication of animals for food. Today our food animals willingly walk to their deaths, seemingly happy and content. We have used this same skill to channel other creatures to do our hunting and to protect our homes. But then at some point we got it that we too were animals and if it worked on cows and dogs well what was to keep it from working on humans? The answer of course was ‘nothing.’ It only needed to be refined a bit. And refine it we did, in spades. But rather than call it domesticating now we called it “marketing,” and from that have grown both advertising and politics.

We’ve gotten so good at these things that most folks consider it to be just the way it is, even natural in some sense. To some extent, we all have become blind victims of our

own making. And even the ones who create these illusions we all get fed on a daily bases, fall victim to their own fantasy often.

The vast majority of humans now have truly come to believe that marketing and politics, (both of which are often very insidious, even sinister) are there for our benefit—“to make our lives better.” The underlying message being: “You have no reason to be further informed beyond what you are told; just trust us. We are here to make your life the best it possibly can be!”

This is a very strange paradox for sure, one that most of us bump into on occasion, if not often. On the one hand we want the illusion. It is comfortable and seems safe. And on the other hand we know that a larger truth is only a question or set of questions away.

In accepting the messages before us cart blanche, we have lost discernment, in-depth investigating and understanding. We have lost the access to multiples of views and opinions. Couple this loss with a dumb-down system of schooling which has become just a training academy disconnected from any concept of real education, makes engaging with life, in an open and healthy way, an endangered activity. An activity that can actually bring you harm, put at risk your livelihood and future because it threatens the powers that be. And that is right here in the United State—not in China, North Korea, or Iraq.

In the end this trick that we have refined and used in all kinds of ways is not unlike hypnotism. The key is to remember that hypnotism will not work without a willing subject. Our job is to work every moment to try to look in another direction and see what’s actually going on. To keep your eyes turned away from the swinging watch. It is on us, and if we don’t then by default we become like so many others convinced that we must live in this world as it is, not as we could make it.

What we know, that many wish we didn’t, is that this marketing psychology which has become the keystone of almost everything in the modern and post modern world is not fixed. It can not only turn our focus to the lizard mind, the core emotional triggers like sex and fear, the most common tools of the trade, but it can also turn one towards another set of emotional foods, those of curiosity, responsibility, and nurture; foods which are surely harder to prepare but offer much more flavor and are truly satisfying.

Minds can open rather than narrow, and when this happens we develop new values. Ones that give worth to diversity and the kind of prosperity it creates. These types of values by their nature support a growing sense of importance and evolving perception and trust in a wider view. When we can support each other in this new direction it frees us from the swinging watch. It can open up a life of knowing and owning our true role as stewards here, participating in the evolution of our home. And in doing this we return to our roots, to being fed by the raising of the roof beams, growing community in the work of life!

I believe that people can be opened to this kind of understanding, and that in fact the nature of the species is to know this as our purpose, to sustain and nurture. Like in the

reading Steve offered this morning, it reflects an example of people coming together to make a different choice, in fact a whole set of different choices.

Any one who was there during Peoples Park as I was will remember the reaction that was triggered, and how the governing bodies, Ronald Reagan the governor at that time, had set the board with what they were sure were only pawns on our side. At that time in history it was unthinkable that people would actually be making choices for themselves that would benefit themselves and others. A trend that could not be supported!

And at the time it seemed like a terrible situation and it certainly was. But what did happen at that event in history was that a huge bunch of folks got that old idea of raising the roof beams, they got freed from the swinging watch to never be trapped in those ways again.

When the pepper gas was billowing all over upper Telegraph Avenue and the blood was spilling from all the wounds, we were carrying the roof beams of a broader view, an awakening that continues to this day.

In 1969 you could walk down any street in Berkeley and asked anybody what Ecology was, and they would almost to the person say, "Is it a new drug?" Or "something to do with zoology?"

And today, you cannot run for national office without being able to have an at least seemingly informed conversation about ecology and the environment. That is a significant shift, and one that has happened largely because a group of folks gathered together to look outside the blinders of our marketed society.

The question then becomes how do we in this changed world direct our actions towards efforts which are good, things that will sustain us? What can we do that will help us to not be complicit in the ongoing destruction and depletion of this home of ours? And to eventually change the course of our values. What legacy can we leave to further the work of an evolution of joy and sustainability here?

To act it seems to me we need to put simple terms forward even though we all know things are never entirely black and white. Still good and bad seem like the right words for this. Why, because I have made an assumption, that if you are here on a Sunday morning, you have made a judgment about what is good and what is bad use of your time. And in this way I believe these words work for us.

Good and bad when viewed intellectually can be extremely difficult to identify. That is because they are essentially reflections of emotion. Good and bad as constants drift around a whole lot and are subject to context; to a time and place, and a subjective view. Not unlike Heisenberg's Uncertainty principal that says that in observing something one changes the reality. Adding your participation changes the equation. And this is how ideas of good and bad work. It is our participation with or observation of that gives the

value. So in a real way we are not only charged with understanding good and bad but in being participants in creating it as well.

So how can we know when we further the good and lessen the bad?

Well it be truth I am not sure that we ever can. But looking back over time we can understand if something was good or bad by its effect on us now. And so with Peoples Park, it was truly a devastating time and a very bad one for the young man who died but in looking back it was a good time in what it has fostered in conversation, awakening and positive change.

So all this said, where does it leave us? What is our job now? Well our job “ If we choose to accept it “ is to keep open and to act, to trust that mistakes are not necessarily bad but can be our best teachers. That if we choose not to act because we can see both side of the good bad coin we must turn away from the swinging watch and act from our hearts, Above all we must remember that we raise the roof beams together and that when we do, we perpetuate celebration in our community. That in this what we learn deeper and more meaningful was of responsibility and stewardship.

We must work in the support of one another or else we perpetuate the hypnosis and capitulate. The moment to build the peoples park of our time is here, we all know it. So call out loud, “ We are raising the roof beams” from Eduardo’s to the Starbucks and Whole Foods and Trader Joes, and even more importantly don’t forget to gather your tools, muster your skills, cook a good meal and be there for the raising and the celebration together, if you hear the call!

So be it.