

Rev. Fran Dearman
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Tall Trees: Leadership and Discernment

I was born and raised on Vancouver Island. We have trees there: great maples by the tide-swept beaches, fir and hemlock up the slope, gaunt Garry oak eking out the droughts of summer in their meadows. I see trees on the skyline and I know where I am. Here in Calgary, I look for the Calgary Tower, and Nose Hill, to remind me where I am.

So when I think about leadership, I often think of tall trees, daring to stand out above the rest and show us the way, and I am grateful for their courage and steadfastness.

At the same time I remember some lines from the old Roman poet Horace:

Horace Odes 2.10.9-12

**Saepius ventis agitatur ingens/
pinus et celsae graviore casu/
decidunt turrets feriuntque summos/
fulgura montes.**

**The tall pine is more often shaken by the wind,
the lofty towers fall more heavily,
the topmost mountains bear the thunderbolts.**

In other words, when a person steps into a leadership role, a person steps into the zone where the lightning strikes. That's the risk you take, when you make things

happen. Confrontation is the price of leadership; learning to do confrontation well is the price of community. And most of us would rather go to the dentist for a root canal.

Leadership is necessary to any enterprise; things happen because someone makes it happen. How that comes about is always interesting.

Change is challenging, but change is also a sign of life. And life demands decisions. The lesser of two evils is not a difficult choice to make, though it may be difficult to live with. And discerning that a good idea is better than a bad one is not so difficult either. But when two good ideas try to occupy the same space, then truly it is difficult to choose between them.

Moreover, sometimes we are not so much choosing between ideas, as choosing how power will be applied, or how fear will be addressed. And always, always we may ask ourselves: where is hope in this? Where is love? Where is the holy?

The task of leadership requires effective communication skills. Inevitably there will be conflict. The folks who accept the call of a leadership role must learn to engage conflict constructively. And with any luck, all of us will know that we have been heard. We won't always get our own way, but we do need to be heard, to be respected, and to be fairly treated.

Recently my beloved colleagues in ministry decided that they needed to read this really serious book; so willy nilly I had my mind improved. I further profited by the conversations about the book earlier this month at our winter retreat.

Looking out the window at deer wandering across a green lawn made it a lot easier for me to get my mind improved. But in the end I was grateful to the leadership of my beloved colleagues that led me to read this thick heavy book.

The book we read was John Ralston Saul's recent publication, "A Fair Country: Telling Truths about Canada". We decided that Saul's book is not a history book; it is polemic—a deliberately controversial attack on a political opponent. Saul's book is not history, but it does make me want to read more Canadian history, and learn

why Saul gets so excited about the Great Peace of Montreal in 1701, and why I ought to know more about some folks called Crowfoot and Poundmaker.

The basis of Saul's argument is that Canada is essentially a métis nation, that Europeans survived their first two hundred years here because of the generous mentorship of the First Nations peoples, and that some characteristics of indigenous peoples shaped Canadian culture ever after.

First, Saul argues that indigenous culture offers a model of inclusivity, and so, on a good day, we would naturally enlarge our circles of community to include others—as Hebrew scripture would have it, to welcome the stranger among us.

Further, Saul argues that this indigenous model of community, coupled with the best of French and British law, would lead us to a policy of minimal impairment—that being in the majority is no licence to trample on minorities; rather that any change enacted by a majority should diminish others as little as possible.

Next, Saul argues that the indigenous model of community calls for the building of relationship and continual on-going re-negotiation. Leadership means we keep talking to each other, over and over. We keep in touch. We check back in, again and again. We are wary of lines drawn in the sand. We have immeasurable patience with one another as we walk towards mutual understanding.

Modern authors on relationship say much the same thing, so that certain phrases have entered our daily speech: How do you feel about that? Does that work for you? What do you need out of this? Where's the win-win?

Modern negotiators suggest a similar approach to political negotiations, even in such challenging arenas as Northern Ireland and Palestine. A rational approach is not enough; we need to hear one another's story, and all that goes with it, if we are to build a lasting peace. ~~[newspaper article]~~

Continual ongoing re-negotiation takes resources, commitment, time and patience. Lasting peace is worth the price.

When I consider the price of peace and the cost of war, I am often mindful of a movie that came out some forty years ago, called "The Devil's Brigade", based on the Special Service Force in World War Two. I read in a history book—alas I do

not recall the name—that while they fought in Italy there was an officer, a former football player, who was negotiating the surrender of a trapped enemy unit. There was a land line telephone; the officer became impatient, and he slammed down the phone and said, to heck with it, let's just take the hill, which they did, but with significant loss of life. Men died who did not need to die, because their leader chose to do something straightforward and direct like charge into a heavily defended position, rather than take time to negotiate.

And I can understand it; negotiation takes its own form of courage. Physical confrontation, or flight, or denial—all of these may seem simpler and easier and preferable compared to taking time for complex verbal confrontation.

But, according to John Ralston Saul, the indigenous model of ongoing re-negotiation is part of our Canadian cultural heritage. And from this gift for relationship we can build a lasting peace and a functioning community.

Let's look a little closer to home.

When your board named an interim search team last year, and they sought me out to walk with you as interim minister, your leadership were keen that I work on conflict resolution. There had been conflict, I was told. And they wanted to learn to do conflict management better.

How bad could this be, I asked myself? Might my skills be up to the task?

How bad could it be?

Bad is when someone brings a loaded shotgun into the sanctuary on a Sunday morning. It can't have been that bad—I would have heard.

Bad is when the minister runs off with an underage choir director, and takes the endowment fund with them. It can't have been that bad—I would have heard.

Well, it seems that there were strong words spoken loudly at a board meeting, and other words spoken in public that perhaps should have first been heard in private. No shotguns. OK, I'm in.

What I saw was a board that had reflected on past events, and learned from them. I love folks who climb the learning curve. Hindsight is 20/20, but not all of us actually learn from past experience. Not all of us are deliberately pro-active rather than re-active. Not all of us care enough to be aware of ourselves, set ourselves aside, and work very hard at understanding the past so we can do better in the future. “Connections are made slowly”, not least the connections with our own behaviours.

I am awed that the leadership of this church is committed to learning from the past to build a better future. John Ralston Saul would be proud of you.

I have been awed to see you take advantage of denominational resources and models, such as the Town Hall Meeting called by the ministerial search team, the workshop Beyond Categorical Thinking with the Rev. Keith Kron, and the workshop led by Diane Pask and Rachel Collins on Affirmative Inquiry. I was awed by this notion of affirmative inquiry— that we should begin by celebrating what we like about our religious community and then move on to what we would like to add to that, rather than begin with a litany of dissatisfactions.

I note that another workshop on change and growth and maturation is scheduled for March 27th, led by two Canadian Unitarian Council programme people, Linda Thomson of Ontario and Liz James of Saskatoon. Our congregation president, Jane Ebborn, can tell you all about this coming workshop. I urge you to attend.

This congregation’s leadership has also generated a Conflict Management Policy, which has been approved by the Board. The whole text can be found on the church website. Rachel Collins has done a one page précis, which was published in the December Quest.

[handouts]

Briefly, the précis suggests:

- That conflict is normal;
- That one seek to create an environment that is courteous, supportive, respectful, open, honest, and safe;
- That it is better to resolve our differences than avoid acknowledging them;
- That some behaviours are more helpful than others in managing conflict;

- That where there is conflict, first we try to speak directly with one another;
- That we take turns, talking and listening, and seek mutual understanding;
- And when conflict continues, we can continue seeking a win-win that we can all live with, enlarging the discourse if necessary, through an established path of mediation.

I believe that where folks have resolved a difference, the relationship might even be stronger afterward, and the channels of communication more clear.

For example, let me tell you about Gord and the gas cans.

Once upon a time my good friend Gord and I were having one of those conversations about motor oil and boat gas and how many litres in which fuel tank. Out on the float, in the fresh air, with a light breeze blowing, doing math in your head can be a challenge. My good friend and I just did not seem to be on the same wave length. Now, in my younger years, fuelled by the tradition of deck department and engine room rivalry, I might have blown up at my good friend, and that would have been a very bad thing. But I've mellowed with age. I no longer keep things tamped down until the straw that breaks the camel's back and then explode. So rather than yell at my good friend Gord, I said, "We're both smart people. Let's take a closer look at this." And we stepped forward and looked into the boat at the gas cans in question and learned that where I had known there were three gas cans, Gord had only been aware of two. Problem solved. Simple arithmetic, once you're working from the same data.

Change is constant. Conflict is inevitable. Two good ideas in the same place will always challenge us. But with goodwill and care, dissonance, resolved, will lead to deeper, richer harmony.

I invite our special guest choir, Vocal Latitudes, to illustrate how harmony grows from dissonance, with some special music, titled "Nero's Expedition".

John Ralston Saul's polemic leads up to an attack on the leadership of Canada for, well, reluctance to lead. Saul berates civil servants who don't generate constructive

policies, and businessmen who would rather pillage their companies than take on the responsibility of owning a company that does real work and creates real wealth. Saul charges that too many of our leaders in business and politics have forgotten who they are and where they are and what they should be doing.

To know who we are is a deeply religious question, one that shapes our shared values, fosters a healthy community, and helps us engage our conflicts in a healthy, respectful manner.

When we consider how we do leadership—and we all do leadership—when we consider how we do leadership, let us remember who we are.

I believe we are people of worth and dignity; and so is everyone else. I believe we engage the world through an essential reverence, like our feelings for the trees and the high mountains. Let us extend that feeling of reverence also towards one another. Let us offer no less to one another, and let us expect no less for ourselves.

In conclusion, there will always be two or more good ideas in one place. There will always be room for conflict. May there also always be room for continued negotiation, and ongoing communication. Your Board has taken this to heart, has learned from the past, and seeks to carry that learning into the future.

When I think of leadership, I think of tall trees that show us the way and remind us who we are. I also think of a tree I saw once, up by the Columbia Icefield. This tree was scarcely knee high. But it was six hundred years old. For six centuries this tree had held on, re-negotiating the essence of survival every season. For six hundred years this tree remembered who it was, and sheltered life within the compass of its own life.

May we do no less. May we too build a community of sheltering trees. May it be so.

Bibliography

Sharon Strand Ellison, “Taking the War Out of Our Words: The Art of Powerful Non-Defensive Communication”, 1998-2007. One of many books on the topic of healthy communication models.

John Ralston Saul, “A Fair Country: Telling Truths about Canada”, 2008. Saul argues that Canada’s heritage as a métis nation includes some healthy patterns for nationhood, especially inclusion, ongoing negotiation, and minimal impairment.

Robert Latham, “Moving on from Church Folly Lane”, 2008. Latham speaks to a range of church policy issues, especially the systems dynamic of the pastoral to programme size shift. It is to this book that I owe the phrase, that nothing happens unless someone makes it happen.

Horace, “Odes”, Book 2, tenth ode, line 9-12; a poem about the middle way.

Film, “The Devil’s Brigade”, 1968, starring William Holden and Cliff Robertson, based on the formation of the first Special Service Force in the second World War.