

Excerpt from Chapter 4

From the Edge

Change Happens from the Edge

Change does not happen from the center. It happens, almost every time, from the edge. The center may hope for and call for change, as was the case with The Call to Action, when The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church asked for studies for the revitalization of the denomination. But the output of the studies and The Call to Action are plans in which the bishops gain more power (called “accountability” in the study) and the local churches (the unit already carrying a back-breaking load) are called to carry more, or to count more. This is the problem with the center proposing change: it usually is an external cry that has no internal ability to transform. Those in power in all systems naturally seek to remain in power or to increase their power. It is done intuitively and without forethought.

In order for this Jesus Insurgency to occur, the leaders within *and* the leaders without (those currently on the edge of the system) must be able to make decisions from a new perspective. Church consultant Gil Rendle (citing Ronald Heifetz and Donald Laurie) calls this the “Balcony Perspective.”¹ This perspective takes a step away from the center in order to see the broader view. Rendle also comments that we need to protect the voices of creative deviants.² So the view must change, and the voices heard must change, and the decision making must follow a new path. Entrepreneur Seth Godin states that new leaders cannot be about sheepwalking, which is “the outcome of hiring people who have been raised to be obedient and giving them brain-dead jobs and enough fear to keep them in line.”³ Instead, Godin calls the future guides “heretics,” saying,

Heretics are the new leaders. The ones who challenge the status quo, who get out in front of their tribes, who create movements. The marketplace now rewards and embraces the heretics. Suddenly, heretics, troublemakers, and change agents aren’t merely thorns in our side--they are the keys to our success.⁴

Heretic is a charged word for church people. Maybe it is radical enough to get some attention. When a church is stuck on a plateau, sliding in a decline, or not yet recognized as dead, then it is time for a radical dance between pastors and leaders who are yearning to live out their faith in a new way. Since many of our denominations are either

¹ Gil Rendle, *Journey in the Wilderness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 96.

² *Ibid.*, 100.

³ Seth Godin, *Tribes: We Need You to Lead Us* (New York, Portfolio, 2008), 96.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

discouraged, depressed, exhausted, or dying, then it is time for leaders to lean into the work of the Holy Spirit. This Spirit of God will look different in every place. It will be unique, creative, focused, and filled with joy. It will not be replicable in other locations.

What we know about change is that it comes from the inside only when the inside has been ostracized and moved to the edge (think Martin Luther and John Wesley). We know that the change makers are those who operate from the edges of organizations. They are in, but barely. They are seen as troublemakers, rebels, “not like us,” sarcastics, and irreverents. That is why the Jesus Insurgency that is happening right now is happening on the outskirts of religious institutions. (Jesus himself was on the edge of his religious establishment, and from that location, he saved the world.) Institutionaries are not yet noticing this phenomenon as they tend to push away what can bring the very hope they are calling for, out of a need to protect. As Rudy said earlier, conservatives are so labeled because of a need to conserve. The Jesus Insurgency is happening with a mass of dissatisfied church and clergy edge-dwellers who are itching to live out their mission without constraint. They are the ones who are struggling with the reins being continually pulled back, and the loud voice from behind saying, “Whoa, there!” As Jesus call us forward, as the insurgents lead us onward, and as the revolutionaries step into the future, the change process becomes unstoppable.

But that doesn’t make it easy, and that doesn’t mean it won’t happen without a stronghold of despair on the past. It will be hard. It will bring pain, even death, and it will come with a price. But it will come. I believe it is already happening, even if one has not yet noticed.

What we must remember from history and from systemic changes of all organizations, time periods, and transformations is that when the edge gains power, it eventually becomes the center. And in time there will be a new edge, and a new force that rises up to be the church in a new way. This process is alive, ongoing, and never ending. It is what the Scripture means when it says, “Look! I’m doing a new thing; now it sprouts up; don’t you recognize it? I’m making a way in the desert” (Isaiah 43:19).

God, through Isaiah, is talking to the people of his day. And God is still in the talking business. And God is always in the changing business.

The Church Must Release What Holds Us Back

The book title *The Tyranny of Dead Ideas*⁵ says it all. It represents our tendency to live under the tyranny of the past instead of celebrating the past *while moving forward* toward the future. Churches live in the traditions of the past without even asking God if these traditions are presently getting the good news out. In *Detox: For the Overly Religious*,

⁵ Matt Miller, *The Tyranny of Dead Ideas: Letting Go of the Old Ways of Thinking to Unleash a New Prosperity*, (New York: Times Books, 2009).

David Putman states, “Over time we replace our relationship ‘with Jesus’ with a religion ‘about Jesus.’ . . . When this happens, detoxing is required.”⁶

When the church has become more about religion than about loving God and following Jesus, it is time for a detox, which means the death of what once was. When someone goes through detox she or he can never go back to the drug that persuaded her or him away from real life. The church that needs new life also needs to let some things absolutely, unequivocally, irreversibly die. The drug of choice, whether it be traditionalism, power structures, “factory church,” or economic drivers, can never be picked up again. If it is, there is the danger of intoxication or overdose into lethargy.

Seth Godin, in *Tribes*, says, “Religion at its worst reinforces the status quo, often at the expense of our faith.”⁷

Religion at its best is supportive⁸ but flexible. It provides structure to assist us but is fluid enough to throw out the old and create a new structure when the need arises. Unfortunately, the mainline church has become too structured, like bones that get so calcified they are no longer flexible and break easier. Without the lifeblood of new ideas, new connections, and new flow into the current reality of our world, the bones and the structure of the church become brittle and break. We are calcified. Our religious stubbornness is killing our faithfulness. This is so evident today that it is common to hear people say, “I am spiritual, but not religious.” The user profile section on some dating sites has a largely used category called “spiritual but not religious.” By choosing it, users mean they see no value in the form or structure of our religious gatherings or our religious rules. They see that God exists. But they do not see that the church is acting like anything but a valley of dead, dry bones. The church is in desperate need of a restart.

Thomas Bandy, in *Coaching Change*, speaks of the need for religious leaders to move away from hierarchical communication and management of a vision. Instead, Bandy calls for giving in to the chaos that occurs during times of transformation. Too many church pastors are managers, who spend all their time attending meetings, focusing on details, and controlling outcomes. Instead, leaders for today will be the ones who attend to the vision and attend to the Holy Spirit, seeking only to follow God’s lead.⁹ Bandy describes these new leaders in this way:

- Their commitment to moderation reflects their celebration of holistic health, their resistance to work addictions, and their appreciation for personal growth.
- Their commitment to cooperation reflects their readiness to “let go” of control, honor parallel leadership, and empower team.

⁶ David Putman, *Detox: For the Overly Religious* (Nashville B & H Publishing Group, 2010), xv.

⁷ Godin, *Tribes*, 81.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁹ Thomas G. Bandy, *Coaching Change: Breaking Down Resistance, Building Up Hope* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 163–77.

- Their commitment to poverty reflects their priority for relational over material values, renunciation of economic entitlements, and compassion for the oppressed.
- Their commitment to chastity reflects their single-minded pursuit of God’s mission, the simplicity of their lifestyle, and the sincerity of their ministry.
- Their commitment to fidelity reflects their loyalty to their personal, covenanted relationships to spouse and family.¹⁰

The shift from primary allegiance to the institutional church, to loyalty to loving God, loving neighbor, and loving self is one that is transforming the face of the church. Not only are revolutionary pastors not interested in the structures that have failed the church, they also are focused on finding God’s way for being the church today. They are willing to change, and to live into the intuitive knowledge that healthy pastors create healthy environments.

I remember when I went before the Board of Ordained Ministry to be evaluated for ministry in the local church. I was asked this question: “Since you are a young woman with children, how will you be able to manage working seventy to eighty hours a week?”

The clergyman stated that these hours were normal and expected for clergy. I replied that I would not be working that many hours. The gentleman pushed further and said something like, “Well, is your primary commitment to your ordained ministry or to your family?”

I said that God gave me a family and that I made vows to care for that relationship. I did not see a conflict, as my primary relationships with my family were covenantal, just as any relationship I had to the church. I would find a way to manage my time well. There followed a lively discussion about how many hours pastors are expected to work and whether the clergyperson was primarily committed to the call or to the family. The room began to divide according to their stands. This conversation took up much of my time with the board. When did we get to the place where we believed that following God meant deserting our family relationships? And what young people considering ministry today would be even faintly interested if they were told that the work of the church would be all consuming, even to their detriment? And what person who has not yet come to know Jesus Christ would be able to look at a workaholic, stressed-out, lonely pastor and say, “I want to be like her”?

There are things that hold us back: church. Are we willing to let go of ideas that are dead in order to live again? Are we able to release our firm grip on the *isms* of church life in order to find a fresh way to live? Are we courageous enough to set free what has held us back for generations?

¹⁰Ibid., 172.