

NO TRIPWIRES AT THE THRESHOLD

North Idaho Unitarian / Universal Church – Coeur d’Alene, ID
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I SURPRISED MYSELF WHEN SETTLING ON THE TITLE FOR TODAY’S MESSAGE. THE WORD “TRIPWIRE” CAME TO MY MIND, AND THEN I LOOKED IT UP.

ITS FIRST TWO DEFINITIONS WERE: “1) A WIRE STRETCHED NEAR GROUND LEVEL TO TRIP OR ENSNARE AN ENEMY; 2) A WIRE OR LINE THAT ACTIVATES A WEAPON, TRAP, OR CAMERA...WHEN PULLED.”

WHILE I’M NEVER THAT MILITARISTIC IN MY VERBAL IMAGES, “TRIPWIRE” STILL SEEMED LIKE THE RIGHT IMAGE FOR TODAY. FOR THE THRESHOLD I SPEAK OF TODAY IS THE ONE WE ARE INVITED TO CROSS OVER INTO WHAT I HAVE CALLED “WELCOME HOUSE” FOR 15 YEARS.

JOHN BUEHRENS AND BECKY PARKER CALL IT “A HOUSE FOR HOPE”. I WAS FIRST ATTRACTED TO THE BOOK FOR TWO COMPELLING REASONS. FIRST, BECKY PARKER IS A 30-YEAR UNITED METHODIST COLLEAGUE WHOM I FIRST KNEW AS A TEENAGE IN VANCOUVER, WA. HER INTELLECTUAL AND SPIRITUAL DEPTH HAS IMPRESSED ME FOR 40 YEARS.

THE SECOND REASON IS THAT A MUTUAL FRIEND OF OURS SENT ME AN EMAIL IN JUNE SAYING HE WAS SENDING ME THE BOOK AS A GIFT. HE FURTHER MENTIONED THAT CHAPTERS 10 AND 12 REMINDED HIM OF “GOD’S RADICAL HOSPITALITY”, THE IMAGE I’VE BEEN PREACHING AND TEACHING ABOUT FOR 16 YEARS.

MY FRIEND WAS ONLY PARTIALLY RIGHT. GOD’S RADICAL HOSPITALITY IS NOT RESTRICTED TO CHAPTERS 10 & 12 AT ALL. IT PERMEATES THE SPIRIT, PASSION AND INTELLECTUAL INTEGRITY OF BOTH JOHN BUEHRENS AND BECKY PARKER THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE BOOK!

AS READERS ARE INVITED INTO THEIR HOUSE FOR HOPE, THERE ARE NO TRIPWIRES TO TRAP OR ENSNARE THE ENEMY. THERE IS NO NEED FOR TRIPWIRES, BECAUSE PERSONS ARE NOT SEEN AS ENEMIES.

EVERYONE IS WELCOME TO STEP ACROSS THE THRESHOLD TO SEARCH FOR WHATEVER EXPERIENCE OF GOD THEY NEED AT THE TIME. THIS INCLUSIVE WELCOME IS EXTENDED TO ALL, EVEN AS JOHN AND BECKY RECOGNIZE A GREAT MANY PEOPLE IN OUR AMERICAN RELIGIOUS CULTURE WOULD RESIST THEIR “PROGRESSIVE THEOLOGY”.

IN THE NEXT-TO-LAST CHAPTER OF THE BOOK, BECKY CONTRASTS ATTITUDES TOWARD “OUTSIDERS”. ONE IS A FAMILIAR CHRISTIAN APPROACH THAT IDENTIFIES OUTSIDERS AS NONBELIEVERS WHO NEED TO BE SAVED.

BUT SHE SAYS “ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE IS POSSIBLE. A THEOLOGICAL HOUSE CAN BE A PLACE OF HOSPITALITY TO ANY WHO SEEK ITS SHELTER; IT CAN HONOR RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND WELCOME CREATIVE EXCHANGE AMONG MULTIPLE RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND PERSPECTIVES.” (p. 164)

THAT CERTAINLY REFLECTS THE INTENT OF YOUR FELLOWSHIP, DOESN'T IT.

THEN SHE SAYS, “THIS IS THE WAY OF PROGRESSIVE FAITH. AN OPEN DOOR STANDS AT THE THRESHOLD OF OUR THEOLOGICAL HOUSE, ITS DOORSILL WELL-WORN, BY COMINGS AND GOINGS.”

WHETHER AT A “WELCOME HOUSE” OR A “HOUSE FOR HOPE”, HERE IS A THRESHOLD THAT INVITES PERSONS TO CROSS IN FOR NURTURE AND GO BACK OUT FOR SERVICE.

JOHN BUEHRENS AND BECKY PARKER HAVE CREATED A VERY USEFUL “PRIMER IN PROGRESSIVE THEOLOGY”. IT IS DEFINITELY CHRISTIAN IN BASIC ORIENTATION. IT USES BIBLICAL IMAGERY EASILY. BUT IT IS NOT EXCLUSIVELY FOR PERSONS IMMERSSED IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION.

WHETHER YOUR TRADITION MARKS YOU AS CHRISTIAN, AGNOSTIC, BUDDHIST, ATHEIST, OR A “HEINZ-57” MIX OF TRADITIONS, THE THRESHOLD IN THE “HOUSE FOR HOPE” IS YOURS TO ENTER AND EXIST IN YOUR OWN WAY, FREE OF RELIGIOUS TRIPWIRES.

JOHN AND BECKY WRITE A FEW CHAPTERS IN COMMON. BUT THEY MOSTLY SHARE THEIR UNDERSTANDINGS OF PROGRESSIVE THEOLOGY BY ALTERNATING CHAPTERS AS THEY EXPLORE THE FULLER METAPHOR OF A THEOLOGICAL HOUSE.

LIKE I SAID EARLIER, I'VE KNOWN BECKY FOR 40 YEARS, AND I'VE ALWAYS HAD DEEP RESPECT FOR HER INTELLECTUAL CAPACITY AND HER SPIRITUAL INCLUSIVENESS. I HAD NEVER HEARD OF JOHN BUEHRENS. BUT I WOULD LIKE TO SIT DOWN WITH HIM OVER SEVERAL CUPS OF COFFEE TO LEARN MORE FROM HIM.

HE SHOWS HIMSELF TO BE A PASTOR OF GREAT SPIRITUAL WISDOM AND INTELLECTUAL DEPTH. HE IS ALSO A BIBLICAL SCHOLAR WHO CAN

GRACIOUSLY CHALLENGE TRADITIONAL BIBLICAL INTERPRETATIONS WITH GRACE AND CONVINCING INSIGHTS.

HIS PREVIOUS BOOK IS ADDED PROOF OF WHAT I FOUND IN THE BOOK HE CO-AUTHORED WITH BECKY. IN 2004, HE WROTE UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE: AN INTRODUCTION FOR SKEPTICS, SEEKERS, AND RELIGIOUS LIBERALS. I'M STILL WORKING MY WAY THROUGH IT, WITH HI-LITER AND PEN IN HAND.

THIS BOOK WAS WRITTEN A FEW YEARS AFTER HE COMPLETED 8 YEARS AS PRESIDENT OF THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION, THEN BECAME MINISTER OF THE FIRST PARISH IN NEEDHAM, MA.

I ALSO WANT TO INTRODUCE YOU TO A DISCUSSION GUIDE PREPARED FOR "A HOUSE FOR HOPE". IT'S A GUIDE ANYONE CAN DOWNLOAD FROM BEACON PRESS' WEBSITE OR THE UUA BOOKSTORE WEBSITE.

THE GUIDE IS WRITTEN BY THE REV. SARAH GIBB MILLSPAUGH, CURRENTLY CO-MINISTER OF THE UU CONGREGATION IN WINCHESTER, MA., AND A FORMER INTERIM MINISTER AT JOHN BUEHRENS' CURRENT CONGREGATION, FIRST PARISH.

REV. MILLSPAUGH HAS DEVELOPED A SUGGESTED 7-WEEK STUDY OF THE BOOK. IT FOLLOWS WHAT SHE CALLS THE 6 GREAT TOPICS OF LIBERAL THEOLOGY IN THE ORDER JOHN AND BECKY PRESENT THEM:

ESCHATOLOGY (STUDY OF 'FINAL THINGS', 'ULTIMATE HOPES'); **ECCLESIOLOGY** (STUDY OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY); **SOTERIOLOGY** (STUDY OF 'HOW WE ARE SAVED'); **THEOLOGY** (STUDY OF 'GOD-TALK', HOW WE IMAGINE GOD); **ANTHROPOLOGY** (STUDY OF HUMAN NATURE) **PNEUMATOLOGY** (STUDY OF SACRED SPIRIT OF LIFE); AND **MISSIOLOGY** (STUDY OF A SENSE OF MISSION BEYOND THESE WALLS).

DON'T LET THESE HIGH-SOUNDING WORDS PUT YOU OFF. JOHN AND BECKY USE THEM ONLY AS SHORT-HAND LANGUAGE TO DESCRIBE KEY TOPICS THAT ALL FAITH COMMUNITIES DEAL WITH – SOME INTENTIONALLY, MOST WITHOUT REALIZING WHAT THEY ARE DOING.

IT HAS BEEN SO HARD FOR ME TO IDENTIFY WHAT I HAVE TIME TO SHARE ABOUT THIS BOOK. I'VE READ MY COPY TWICE, THE FIRST TIME STRAIGHT THROUGH, THE 2ND TIME WITH HI-LITER AND PEN COVERING NEARLY EVERY SENTENCE.

SO IN MY REMAINING TIME, LET ME SHARE PARTS OF 2 STORIES, ONE FROM JOHN, THEN FROM BECKY. THEY REFLECT THE THOUGHTFUL,

INCLUSIVE INTELLECTUAL AND SPIRITUAL COURAGE OF THE AUTHORS AND OF THIS BOOK.

(JOHN, p. 118-119) THERE IS A LITTLE GIRL IN MY PARISH NAMED GWEN. SHE IS ALMOST SEVEN. THAT SHE HAS SURVIVED EVEN TO THIS AGE IS SOMETHING OF A HUMAN AND MEDICAL MIRACLE. AS I OFTEN TELL PEOPLE, ONE OF THE CONDITIONS ON WHICH WE HAVE LIFE, AND THE CHANCE FOR FREEDOM, CHANGE AND CREATIVITY, IS THAT THINGS CAN ALSO GO RANDOMLY, RADICALLY WRONG.

GWEN HAS A LITTLE-UNDERSTOOD GENETIC ILLNESS, A MITOCHONDRIAL DISEASE. THERE IS SOMETHING WRONG WITH THE PARTS OF HER CELLS THAT PRODUCE ENERGY...LAST YEAR, GWEN WAS IN A PEDIATRIC INTENSIVE-CARE UNIT SO OFTEN THAT EVERYONE LOST COUNT OF THE DAYS. THEN SHE NEARLY DIED. HER PARENTS SAID TO HER, "WE'RE NOT READY FOR YOU TO GO." AND SHE DIDN'T. BUT SHE MAY STILL. WE ALL WILL IN TIME.

GWEN HAS TWO MOMS. THAT HAS ABSOLUTELY NOTHING TO DO WITH HER ILLNESS. BUT WHEN SHE WAS LITTLE, AND HER DOCTORS COULD NOT UNDERSTAND WHAT WAS WRONG WITH HER, HER MOMS WERE SUBJECTED TO THE EXCRUCIATING EXPERIENCE OF BEING ACCUSED OF *CAUSING* GWEN'S ILLNESS...

SUCH CRUEL DISTRUST CAN LITERALLY TURN YOU TO STONE. OR ELSE IT CAN TURN YOU TOWARD OTHERS, TO COMPLETE OPENNESS AND HONEST, HUMAN VULNERABILITY. GWEN'S MOMS CHOSE THE LATTER PATH...

NEITHER OF GWEN'S MOMS WOULD USE MUCH TRADITIONAL THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE. SUE CONSIDERS HERSELF A BUDDHIST...KIM WAS RAISED AS A LIBERAL CHRISTIAN...BOTH ARE MUSIC EDUCATORS. THEY TEACH CHILDREN TO LOVE THE BEAUTY OF MUSIC. THEY HEAR AND ALMOST SEEM TO SEE THE UNSEEN.

...WHERE IS GOD IN ALL THAT THEY MUST FACE? IT (GOD) CHANGES... DESPITE EVERY CHANGE, EVERY CHANCE OF LOSS, TO BE UPHELD BY A RELIABLE FOUNDATION TO SHARED LIVING. THIS IS TO KNOW GOD. NOT THE STATIC GOD OF CLASSIC THEISM. THAT GOD IS DEAD. BUT (HERE IS) A GOD WHO SUSTAINS SHARED HOPE, AS WE RECONSTRUCT THE CONNECTIONS, BEYOND EVERY HUMAN LOSS AND CHALLENGE."

(BECKY, p. 123-125) BECKY WAS ON A NATIONAL UNITED METHODIST COMMITTEE TO EXAMINE OUR DENOMINATION'S SEEMINGLY ENDLESS STRUGGLE WITH HOMOSEXUALITY. ONE OF HER COLLEAGUES ON THE

COMMITTEE WAS ALSO A SEMINARY PROFESSOR, BUT WAS REALLY ON THE “OPPOSITE SIDE OF TABLE” IN THIS ISSUE. SHE CALLED HIM “SAM”.

I’VE REFERRED TO OUR CHURCH’S STANCE ON HOMOSEXUALITY AS SCHIZOPHRENIC. BECKY CALLED THE POSITION “HIGHLY DIVISIVE”. IN ONE SENTENCE, WE DESCRIBE HOMOSEXUAL PERSONS AS “PEOPLE OF SACRED WORTH WHOSE CIVIL RIGHTS NEED PROTECTION.” IN THE NEXT SENTENCE, OUR DENOMINATION’S RULE BOOK, THE DISCIPLINE, SAYS THE PRACTICE OF SAME-SEX LOVE IS INCOMPATIBLE WITH CHRISTIAN TEACHING.

AT ONE POINT, SAM TELLS BECKY, “YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND. IF I WERE TO AGREE WITH YOU, MY WHOLE FAITH WOULD FALL APART.” HIS OUTBURST CAME BECAUSE BECKY “SUGGESTED TO HIM THAT GOD’S LOVE, AS REVEALED IN THE LIFE AND MINISTRY OF JESUS, CALLED THE CHURCH TO AFFIRM SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS.

...IT (GOD’S LOVE) STRETCHES ME AND MY COMMUNITY BEYOND OUR ESTABLISHED NORMS INTO ADVENTURES IN INCLUSIVENESS, GREATER SOLIDARITY WITH THOSE WE EXCLUDE AS “OTHER” – INCLUDING THE “OTHER” WITHIN OURSELVES. TO BE A CHRISTIAN IS TO BE OPEN TO CHANGE, TO MOVE IN THE DIRECTION OF DEEPER CARING, COMPASSION AND COURAGE.

MY RELIGIOUS VIEWPOINT THREATENED SAM TO THE CORE...SAM SUMMARIZED HIS THEOLOGY SUCCINCTLY FOR ME. HE FELT LOVED BY GOD WHEN HE WAS OBEDIENT TO GOD’S RULE...PATRIARCHAL HETEROSEXUAL UNION IS THE WAY GOD HAS ORDAINED THINGS TO BE. TO DEVIATE FROM IT WOULD BE TO TURN AWAY FROM GOD’S LOVE.

...FURTHERMORE, SAM EXPLAINED, THOSE WHO TURN AWAY FROM GOD’S LOVE WILL SUFFER THE TORMENTS OF THE DAMNED, AND THOSE WHO ACCEPT IT WILL BE REWARDED WITH ETERNAL LIFE. GOD’S LOVE, HE SAID, INCLUDES REWARDS AND PUNISHMENTS, BECAUSE HUMAN BEINGS ARE NOTHING MORE THAN SELFISH, WILLFUL CHILDREN.

TO AGREE WITH ME, SAM FELT HE WOULD HAVE TO ABANDON HIS CORE EXPERIENCE OF WHAT IT MEANT TO LIVE WITHIN THE EMBRACE OF GOD’S LOVE. THE CONVERSE WAS TRUE FOR ME. I COULDN’T AGREE WITH SAM UNLESS I WALKED AWAY FROM THE BEST THAT I KNEW LOVE TO BE: THE GIFT OF GRACIOUS, TRANSFORMING, UNEXPECTED INVITATION INTO GREATER LIFE THROUGH INCREASED CONNECTION AND ENGAGEMENT WITH OTHERS, ESPECIALLY THOSE THAT THE DOMINATING SOCIETY DEEMED “OTHER”.

THE THEOLOGICAL CONTRASTS COULD NOT BE ANY STARKER, COULD THEY! BECKY AND SAM LEFT THOSE MEETINGS STILL DISAGREEING. I DON'T KNOW HOW THEY FELT ABOUT ONE ANOTHER.

JOHN BUEHRENS AND BECKY PARKER DON'T SHY AWAY FROM THE FULL HUMAN EXPERIENCE OF LIVING AS THEY BUILD THEIR "HOUSE OF HOPE". WHAT THEY'VE CONSTRUCTED AND HOW THEY DESCRIBE THEIR CONSTRUCTION PROCESS MAKES AS STIMULATING AND CHALLENGING A BOOK AS I'VE READ IN A VERY LONG TIME.

ONE LAST THING BEFORE WE CROSS THE THRESHOLD ON OUR WAY OUT TO LIVE BEYOND THESE WALLS. ANOTHER UNITED METHODIST PASTOR, DAN DAMON FROM NORTHERN CALIFORNIA, WROTE A SONG THAT SNIPPED ANY POTENTIAL TRIPWIRES FROM THE THRESHOLD OF HIS "HOUSE FOR HOPE".

I SENSE THAT JOHN BUEHRENS AND BECKY PARKER MIGHT ENDORSE DAN'S SONG AS A SONG OF ENTRANCE. ITS IMAGERY IS OBVIOUSLY CHRISTIAN. ITS MESSAGE IS MORE THAN A SECTARIAN INVITATION.

COME IN FROM THE COLD

COME IN FROM THE COLD, MY FRIEND.
WE PRAY FOR YOUR SAFE RETURN.
DON'T TRY TO EXPLAIN OR DEFEND;
WE KNOW YOU HAD LESSONS TO LEARN.

REFRAIN: COME IN, SIT DOWN, THERE'S ROOM AT THE TABLE;
ENJOY THE FEAST LOVE HAS SPREAD FOR YOU.

CHRIST JESUS NOW CALLS YOUR NAME;
THE CRY IN YOUR HEART SAYS COME.
RETURN LOVE'S EMBRACE WITHOUT SHAME;
REJOICE AS GOD WELCOMES YOU HOME. REFRAIN:

THE BREAD AND THE WINE ARE HERE;
COME NOW ALL HUNGER AND THIRST.
COME NEEDY, COME NOW WITHOUT FEAR;
DRINK JOY AS THE LAST BECOME FIRST. REFRAIN: