

Believing the Impossible

Sermon for Highland Avenue Church of the Brethren - April 3, 2016

By Cheryl Brumbaugh-Cayford

Scripture: John 20:19-31

I love it when a mash-up of different sources gives me a new idea. I heard this called “idea generation” on NPR this morning, in a radio interview with someone who works with social media, Facebook, Twitter, etc., and was commenting about how our increasing connection with each other and people around the world through the Internet may result in new ideas.

But I still get “idea generation” from books. I love reading and I love books—I always have, since I was very little. My parents used to read to us every night before bed, and their choice of bedtime reading ranged from the Little House on the Prairie series, to comic books like Asterix and Tintin and Pogo. So I grew up knowing that you can get something out of books you read just for fun, as well as books on serious subjects that you read because you really ought to.

A couple of weeks ago I experienced an interesting mash-up of ideas when two books I was reading happened to raise the same question. One was just-for-fun reading, a fantasy novel by Terry Pratchett. If you don't know Pratchett's Discworld books, probably all I need to tell you to give the flavor of them, is that his fantasy novels are set on a flat world, carried on the backs of four elephants, who ride on the back of a giant turtle that is swimming through space! I've been reading Pratchett's books ever since Anna Speicher lent me the first Discworld novel a couple of years ago. I've become addicted, mostly because of their silliness—his bad puns are among the worst!—mixed in with really clever writing, satire, and social commentary.

I was reading a Pratchett book called “Hogfather” during the same period of time that Mark Flory Steury gave me a book called, “The Relevance of the Impossible: A Reply to Reinhold Niebuhr,” written by G.H.C. MacGregor and published by the Fellowship of Reconciliation, in London, in 1941. Since the death of his wife, Mary Jo Flory-Steury, Mark had been sorting through her books, and giving some to people he knew would appreciate them.

This book is indeed special, in part because of the names of its former owners written in the front: at the top the signature of Ralph E. Smeltzer, then of Wendell Flory, then of Mary Jo.

The first owner of this book, Ralph Smeltzer, was a leader in the Church of the Brethren work for peace and justice in the mid-20th century. During World War II he and his wife Mary Blocher Smeltzer volunteered as teachers at Manzanar, one of the camps where the US

government interned Japanese-Americans during the war. Later, during the Civil Rights movement, Ralph Smeltzer volunteered to work in Selma, Alabama, for about two years as an unofficial mediator attempting to bring about communication and mutual understanding between the black and white communities.

The second owner of this book, Wendell Flory, was Mary Jo's father, and had gone to China with his family to serve in the Church of the Brethren mission there before the communist revolution made it become impossible for American missionaries to stay in China. When they had to leave, Wendell Flory and his family went on to live and serve in India in the Brethren mission there.

The third owner of the book, Mary Jo, was born in India, taught in a mission school in Nigeria as a young woman, became a pastor, then director of our denomination's Office of Ministry, and then became associate general secretary of the Church of the Brethren. In recent years I've been impressed by how she encouraged women to make strides in ministry and in leadership in the church. I expect there were days when she thought that was an impossible task—especially on days when the misogyny that still exists in sectors of our denomination kept district executives from sharing women's profiles, or kept women from being interviewed for pastorates, or kept women from being voted into office by Annual Conference.

In addition to the witness of the former owners, this book is a witness of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. At the time, during World War II, the Fellowship of Reconciliation was an organization of Christians, some from England and from Germany who joined together despite the war between their countries to advocate for peacemaking as the true path of discipleship.

The Fellowship of Reconciliation published this book to assert the validity of Christian pacifism in opposition to Reinhold Niebuhr, a theologian who supported the war and had written a book titled "Why the Christian Church Is not Pacifist." Niebuhr was arguably the most popular theologian of the time, and this little book lived up to its title, asserting the relevance of the impossible by attempting an impossible task: answering back to Niebuhr. The author, G.H.C. MacGregor, acknowledges on the very first page, "To the nonpacifist majority in the churches his [Niebuhr's] writings have come as a veritable godsend, and no one has been so successful in salving the conscience of the nonpacifist, and even in weaning the pacifist from the pure milk of his faith."

So, by a happy coincidence I was reading both books at the same time, the fantasy novel

and the book of theology, and I realized they were asking the same question: why believe the impossible?

Pratchett's novel is a riff on the old argument that it is important for children to believe in just-for-fun impossibilities like Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy, as training for believing in much more important intangibles—like goodness and kindness, love and truth, ethics and morality. These intangible concepts are impossible in the sense that there is no real way to prove them. We cannot touch or feel them, or prove them through science, but we rely on them every day of our lives. As Pratchett tells it, if we stop believing in things like goodness and kindness and love, then we will no longer be human. I love it that in Terry Pratchett's universe, to be human you have to believe in the impossible!

The book by G.H.C. MacGregor makes the argument for believing in the impossible by critiquing Reinhold Niebuhr's theology as one that stifles our capacity to hope. This little book manages to pack a dense, almost point-by-point argument against Niebuhr into just 96 pages, so I'm not going to bore you with a play by play of this argument between theologians. And I'm also not going to attempt it because I don't know enough about Niebuhr's writing to assess properly the argument that MacGregor makes against him. I wish I had paid more attention when we studied Niebuhr in seminary, but being a peace person myself I probably was just as unimpressed with him as MacGregor seems to be!

I have to say, though, that one thing I love about this book is the way MacGregor—who is so unknown these days that there isn't even a Wikipedia entry on him, or at least none that I could find—I love the way MacGregor takes on the “big dog” by returning repeatedly to baselines that Brethren also treasure—the baselines of the life of Jesus Christ, and the teachings of the New Testament.

For example, MacGregor critiques Niebuhr for his condemnation of pacifists as being misled by the belief that humanity at some level is essentially good. Niebuhr wrote that Christian peacemakers “adopted the simple expedient of denying...the reality of evil in order to maintain its hope in the triumph of the ideal of love in the world” (“An Interpretation of Christian Ethics”). Niebuhr also condemned Christians who believed in nonviolent resistance, or forgiveness, as means of overcoming evil in the enemy, writing that people who think that way are reading something into the New Testament that is not there and are confusing the purely religious with the pragmatic. Niebuhr critiqued Christians who focused on war as an evil, and in doing so ignore

other equally pernicious evils that mark our society. MacGregor notes in his book that this “formidable indictment...must be frankly faced and answered.”

To answer Niebuhr, MacGregor quotes extensively from the gospels and from Jesus’ teachings that lifted up God’s creation as good. He cites the ways that Jesus called out the good in the people around him. He points out that Jesus was never blind to the power of sin, nor was he blind to the evils in the world, but Jesus persisted in demonstrating that every person could repent and find the way to God, even the most egregious sinner.

MacGregor writes:

The estimate of human nature on which Niebuhr’s case so largely depends is one of pessimism and gloom entirely out of tune with the joy and hope of the whole New Testament. It seriously distorts the New Testament doctrine of the Incarnation, for it makes Christ’s nature exclusive rather than representative, and sees Him as a ‘divine intruder’ into an alien world rather than as ‘the first-born of all creation.’ It gives little or no meaning, as we shall see, to the Holy Spirit; and it makes nonsense of Paul’s claim that ‘we are fellow-workers together with God.’ It is fair to remember that it was the last war which...gave a fresh lease of life to this reactionary theology of despair for which there is no justification either in Scripture or in the Christian creed. Certainly the world’s agony has taught us this much, that ‘progress’ is not the easy, inevitable evolutionary process of which once we dreamed. As C.H.Dodd has said, ‘the Gospel does not speak of progress, but of dying and rising again.’ (page 41).

In short, MacGregor critiques Niebuhr so strongly because that acclaimed theologian somehow couldn’t go all the way in believing in the impossible.

There have been many peacemakers, and many Brethren, who have taken the position that it is the impossible that we have to believe in, and it is the impossible for which we must strive. One of them is the first name listed in this book, Ralph Smeltzer. I am amazed by the impossibility of what Ralph and Mary Smeltzer attempted as they aided Japanese-American neighbors in southern California. Here is part of their story, as written by Mary:

Pearl Harbor Day—Sunday, December 7, 1941—is a day many of us remember in detail, including exactly where we were and what we were doing. At the time, Ralph and I were teaching school and living in East Los Angeles. For us, it marked the beginning of our interest and activity in the plight of Japanese Americans on the West Coast during World War II. Very soon public and military pressure began to mount “to do something about the ‘Japs’ on the Coast.” . . . Demands for evacuation grew, encouraged by the Hearst Press, Caucasian vegetable and nursery growers, and Lt. General John B. Dewitt, West Coast military commander. National security then became the pretext for the evacuation of the 110,000 Japanese Americans living on the West Coast....

The first Japanese Americans to be evacuated were those living on Terminal Island, a fishing colony located in San Pedro—the Los Angeles harbor. They were given a forty-eight hour notice in February, 1942, to dispose of their possessions and move out. Ralph took a day off from school to help. He had already been demoted from a regular to a substitute teacher in the Los Angeles schools because he expressed his conscientious objection to selling defense stamps. He was shocked at seeing army jeeps with machine guns patrolling the streets while looters were raiding houses from the alleys.... Within a few weeks all Japanese Americans in the Los Angeles area were evacuated, usually early in the mornings. We helped serve them breakfast at the train and bus stations, getting up at five o’clock, helping at the stations, then hurrying off to school.

First stop for evacuees was an “assembly center” such as Santa Anita Race Track, Arcadia, or the Los Angeles County Fair Grounds in Pomona. Horse stalls and hastily-built barracks were used to house them....

Whereas the evacuees were taken from the metropolitan areas in the spring of 1942, those in rural areas were moved in the summer. While we were directing a summer work camp in Farmersville near Lindsay in the San Joaquin Valley, Japanese Americans were taken from that inland area now classified as Zone 2. Some Japanese-American farmers from the Coast had relocated there earlier

expecting to be safe from evacuation. We organized efforts to provide food and transportation to the train station in order to make the leaving a little easier for the evacuees. Although the military leaders welcomed our help, veterans, legionnaires, and local police harassed us and even threatened our lives. The situation was so serious that all helpers were called together early on evacuation day to reconsider our plans and have a prayer meeting. We decided that Christianity was on trial in Lindsay that day, and we must go ahead. Our tormentors surrounded us at the train station, shook their fists, and hurled derogatory remarks, but did not harm us.

Gradually all West-Coast Japanese Americans were put into ten War Relocation Centers in out-of-the-way places east of the Sierras, in California, Arizona, Utah, Colorado, Idaho, Wyoming, and Arkansas. We decided to apply to teach school at the Manzanar Center northeast of Mt. Whitney near Lone Pine, California.

Mary and Ralph Smeltzer went on to live and teach at the Manzanar internment camp, and then they worked to relocate Japanese-American families to Chicago and New York with help from the Church of the Brethren and Bethany Seminary.

As I hear Mary Blocher Smeltzer's account of the nightmare faced by Japanese-Americans, I wonder, who would have thought it possible that our country could round up and imprison a whole segment of Americans, based solely on their race and ethnicity? And yet, today, listening to the statements of a couple of our presidential candidates, I wonder if our country could do that again? How unthinkable is it that candidates for president of the United States can talk about throwing out all Muslim-Americans, can talk about building walls along all our borders, can talk about putting women who have had abortions into prison?

In the 1940s, the Smeltzers faced up to the evils of the time, and answered the unthinkable things that were happening to their Japanese-American neighbors and friends, by believing in the impossible. They believed that love could overcome hate, and that good could overcome evil. They believed that they could do something about the wrongs of this world, and that they could help bring about peace.

I think that's why we are all here in church today. We are gathered here this morning like the disciples huddled together after the crucifixion of their Lord, waiting and watching and

wanting to believe the impossible: to believe that there is hope, despite all evidence to the contrary. To believe that good overcomes evil. To believe that love overcomes hate. To believe that grace overcomes sin. To believe that through the power of resurrection, life overcomes death. And to believe that God invites us to be a part of it—you, and me! To believe that we can do something about the wrongs of this world.

Sometimes I ask myself, can I believe in the impossible? Can I believe in the resurrection? Then I wonder, can I afford not to? And if I believe in the impossible—in life that overcomes death, in goodness, in love, in grace—where will that belief take me? What challenges will God throw in my way? What will I have to give up? But then again, what will I gain? What amazing things will I begin to see, if I open my eyes to the impossible?

Can I pose these questions to you as well? Let's take a few moments of silence to consider these questions for ourselves: Can I believe, can you believe, in the impossibilities of hope, and love, and goodness, and resurrection? And if we believe, where will it take us? What part will God give us, in the holy work of bringing new life to a trouble world?

References:

Macgregor, G.H.C. *The Relevance of the Impossible: A Reply to Reinhold Niebuhr*. London: Fellowship of Reconciliation, 1941

Pratchett, Terry. *Hogfather*. Victor Gollancz, 1996.

Blocher Smeltzer, Mary. "Japanese-American Resettlement Work." *To Serve the Present Age: The Brethren Service Story*. Donald F. Durnbaugh, ed. Elgin: Brethren Press, 1975, pp. 123-125.

He breaks down "The Strangest Secret" as taught by Earl Nightingale and shares the power one receives by giving one's self permission to believe the impossible. Podcast Awesomeness Personal Development Life Coach Training Success Inspiration Motivation Speaker Coach. Show more. Believing the impossible, Calabar, Rivers, Nigeria. 14 likes. Imposibly been possible.Â See more of Believing the impossible on Facebook. Log In. or. Create New Account. See more of Believing the impossible on Facebook. Log In. Forgotten account? Believing the Impossible. [Translations: Japanese]. Every year John Brockman hosts the annual World Question on his Edge site.Â Much of what I believed about human nature, and the nature of knowledge, has been upended by the Wikipedia. I knew that the human propensity for mischief among the young and bored " of which there were many online " would make an encyclopedia editable by anyone an impossibility.