

ART OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

A sermon by F. Jay Deacon

Preached at Unity Church of North Easton
January 20, 2008

While back I dreamed that I was at a conference, and had gotten up in the morning and gone to the conference center lobby out of curiosity to see who else was showing up, and realized I hadn't gotten dressed yet, and was only wearing a towel, when I was told by somebody in the lobby that she was very much looking forward to my workshop which was to begin in five minutes.

So I began to scramble, to get back to my room to shower and dress. But getting there was not going to be easy.

First there was the mud. The hallway had become mired in mud. That turned out to be no problem. Because as I looked at it closely, I saw dry spots where I could step over the mud which opened up like the Red Sea. A miracle! That was nothing. It was that hole in the wall, and that stairway. In a white wall, there was a small opening, one foot high, through which I would have to pass. And there was a hidden stairway, but the floor didn't extend over to where the stairway started — the stairs started in open space with no floor beneath them.



And now I remembered that I had locked myself out of my room anyway.

I stared at the little opening. I stared at the stairway. I tried to figure

THE READINGS

Vaclav Havel,

from The Art of the Impossible

[New York: Knopf, 1997, p. 94f.]

We all know that our civilization is in danger. . . . Modern man, proud of having used impersonal reason to release a giant genie from its bottle, is now impersonally distressed to find he can't drive it back into the bottle again.

We cannot do it because we cannot step beyond our own shadow. We are trying to deal with what we have unleashed by employing the same means we used to unleash it in the first place. We are looking for new scientific recipes, new ideologies, new control systems, new institutions, new instruments to eliminate the dreadful consequences of our previous recipes, ideologies, control systems, institutions, and instruments. . . .

What is needed is something different, something larger. Man's attitude toward the world must be radically changed. . . .

Only those who are looking for a technical trick to save civilization need feel despair. But those who believe, in all modesty, in the mysterious power of their own human Being, which mediates between them and the mysterious power of the world's Being, have no reason to despair at all.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin,

the great paleontologist and Jesuit philosopher, these words of his silenced by the Vatican until after his death. This is from Chapter Three of his great work, *The Phenomenon of Man*

We are, at this very moment, passing through a change of age.

. . . [A]t the cost of what we are enduring, life is taking a step, and a decisive step . . . After the long maturation that has been steadily going on during the apparent immobility of the agricultural centuries, the hour has come at last, characterised by the birth pangs inevitable in another change of state. . . . To us, in our brief span of life, falls the honour and good fortune of coinciding with a critical change of the noosphere.

Of these confused and restless zones in which present blends with future in a world of upheaval, we stand face to face with all the grandeur, the unprecedented grandeur, of the phenomenon of [humanity]. . . . Let us look carefully and try to understand. And to do so let us probe beneath

Continued

out how to hold these very conflicting demands in some kind of useful tension: because I had the demands of the outer world, the workshop I was supposed to do in a couple of minutes, where people were waiting for my arrival; and the demands of the inner world, pictured by the impossible passage I was going to have to make to be ready.



We are always caught between what must be done, and what we have ever managed to do; between what was, where we were, and can be no more; between that and where we must go, what is to be, but is not yet. The space between is *today*. It might feel like nowhere, but it is not. It might seem impossible to negotiate this place, but it has a power all its own.

At first I thought the dream was about the way we are torn by the demands of both our inner and outward lives.

On the one hand, there is the impossible passage which would require our own Transformation, which is impossible.

And on the other hand, there's that world-out-there demanding something of me. They are waiting for my workshop, in five minutes. Oh, three have already passed.

But it was more than that. Creation goes on and we are creation, the process of creation, its eyes and hands and consciousness. There is a impulse at the heart of us to make the future that is to be, an unrelenting drive toward that future.

So there is a tension, there is conflict — between the demands of the soul for Transformation, which, annoyingly, never ceases — and hell, we have to go to work, and bring up kids, or if we are

the surface and try to decipher the particular form of mind which is coming to birth in the womb of the earth today.

Our earth of factory chimneys and offices, seething with work and business . . . — this great organism lives . . . only because of, and for the sake of, a new soul. . . .

Where are we to look for it, where are we to situate this renovating and subtle alteration which, without appreciably changing our bodies, has made new creatures of us?

There was a time when life held sway over none but slaves and children. To advance, all it needed was to feed obscure instincts — the bait of food, the urge of reproduction, the half-confused struggle for a place in the sun, stepping over others, trampling them down if need be. . . .

Yet when the first spark of thought appeared upon the earth, life found it had brought into the world a power capable of criticising it and judging it. . . . Like sons who have grown up, . . . we are discovering that something is developing in the world by means of us, perhaps at our expense. And what is more serious still is that we have become aware that, in the great game that is being played, we are the players as well as being the cards and the stakes. Nothing can go on if we leave the table. . . .

Unique in this respect among all the energies of the universe, consciousness is a dimension to which it is inconceivable and even contradictory to ascribe a ceiling Every increase of internal vision is essentially the germ of a further vision which includes all the others and carries still farther on. . . .

Either nature is closed to our demands for [a future], in which case thought, the fruit of millions of years of effort, is stifled, still-born in a self-abortive and absurd universe. Or else an opening exists — that . . . must open out freely onto limitless psychic spaces in a universe to which we can unhesitatingly entrust ourselves. . . .

This cross-roads where we cannot stop and wait because we are pushed forward by life — what are we going freely to decide?

. . . Have we the right to hesitate?

The world is too big a concern for that. To bring us into existence it has from the beginning juggled miraculously with too many improbabilities for there to be any risk whatever in committing ourselves further and following it right to the end. If it undertook the task, it is because it can finish it

We have said that life, by its very structure, having once been lifted to its stage of thought, cannot go on at all without requiring to ascend even higher.

— from “A Change of Age”, 214ff; and “The Requirements of the Future,” 229ff.

kids, do homework, and God knows what else in the course of a day. When am I ever going to have time for this transformation? I think I have a half hour next Thursday early evening for Transformation. Or — maybe sixty carefully counted minutes on Sunday morning. Meanwhile the apparently impossible and the evidently unthinkable are demanded of us.



Here is another dream, depicting another transformation. This one isn't mine, but one I found in Frances Wickes' book, *The Inner World of Choice*.¹ She's on a journey when she finds a wall blocking her path:

Before me is a wall of molten stones that glow with a sullen orange light. Four giants, born of this same molten stone, tower up from the center of the wall where the stone reddens into a gateway of wicked sullen flame. As I look at the giants, a voice says, "Challenge them!" I shout aloud. At the sound of my voice, the wall, and the four giants who are the towers and pillars of the wall, fall as ash that dissolves into air.



And *there* is the second discovery, which as often as not, we never get around to making. And that is because those Impossibilities in our lives intimidate us, and we don't hang around them long enough to notice the illusions. But if you can live with the tension and the impossibility awhile, you begin to notice them.

There is something that happens in dreams, and it happens in dreams because it is the truth about our waking lives. The dreamer in Frances Wickes' book tried something. She waited around long enough to hear a voice, which told her to challenge the four giants born of molten stone glowing with sullen orange light. She did. And the illusion was uncovered.

You may want to know if I ever got through the little opening or figured out how to get to the stairs from space. I'm sorry to report that something, I would guess the alarm

clock, woke me up and I didn't get to find out.

But I can promise you this: — all signs pointed to the presence of the gods. The tension was too great, the impossibility too impossible. A day like that is inhabited by gods. They come disguised, you know — the Nordic god Odin came disguised as a fisherman in a hut who patched his boat; the Hindu Hari dwells among peasants as a peasant; and the Greek Apollo lodges with shepherds, and Jesus is born in a barn and his twelve peers are fishermen; and this day of yours, so impossible, so full of contradiction, is inhabited by the gods. Emerson said that every day comes to us as a god, full of demands, full of power.



The very power that resides in the obstacle resides also in you, and that is because the power resides not in you nor in the obstacle, but in the moment. In the transformative passage. That is the realm of the gods.

And in those transformative moments, we are called to confront an obstacle or impossibility, to think what cannot be thought and do what cannot be done and become what we did not know we were, but it was our destiny. There is nowhere in all this universe more charged with divine power. *It is the realm of power.* It's an invitation to Transformation that calls to us from our deepest souls.



And religious life has to do with the intersection of something beyond, the energy and intelligence that continues to create this universe of life, the immensity beyond silence, or God, or whatever you like to call that unfathomable whole of which we are a part — the intersection of *that* — and life. The intersection of transcendent and nitty-gritty everyday. It means bringing the selves we are becoming through all this transformation — to bear on the tasks life calls us to.



We know about light. We know about darkness. Goethe had a theory about them.

We think of Goethe as a great literary figure, a poet and a dramatist. But he was also an odd sort of scientist. He wanted more than anything just to observe nature, to read it, to let it speak its meaning to him.

So at the boundary between light and dark, he saw the realm of color, where color comes to be.

As he saw it, there is no color in pure light and no color in pure darkness. Instead he believed that both light and darkness were necessary to call forth color. The coming into being of colors happens in the boundary territory of light and dark. And there, something else that wasn't there before comes into being. Carl Jung pointed out that it's in the polarity of opposites that energy is. Or you could say where the Divine is.

It's where the light and dark intersect that the gods wait to manifest their powers.



The plain fact is that, in life, we are asked to figure out what Václav Havel has called the art of the impossible.

Usually it has to do with our own being and becoming.

It's as though our being and becoming requires some magic, a power from beyond. But there is another way to look at it that may make more sense.

Our lives are a bearing of tensions, of conflicting, impossible demands. The illimitable engines of Life Itself are manifested right there, in those places where the tension is greatest, where light and dark converge, where the equilibrium is disturbed.

It's like this. It's like you before you've been born, in that place of comfort and peace, how cozy, and then a disturbance, and this birth canal presents itself

Ridiculous

Can't get through there

And on the other side is our life, unlived until we go there.



Carl Jung said that life comes to us like a confusing labyrinth or like a calculation so complicated we can't figure it out but there's a factor that keeps distorting the calculation in ways that rob us of our human possibility. He wrote, and I quote him,

The x in the calculation is predisposition.”² Our *predisposition* — our past, our upbringing, the conditioning as a result of the culture of our childhood or education or corporate life — *all that* forms the lens by which we see things, often misperceive things. We see what we have learned to expect to see. *And our past is not the same as our destiny*, not the same as the life and meaning that demands to unfold in us. And we are deluded by our predisposition, our conditioning, and we have to be transformed.

You might wonder how it is that you are here. I might wonder how it is that this former fundamentalist kid from a conservative, no, a *reactionary* town in south Jersey happens to be here today. You wanna try to account for that? And I had two choices. Get transformed, or live an inauthentic life.



We aren't creatures who have fallen from some original perfection! We, and this whole world of life, is a work in progress.

The annoying thing is that, having undergone transformation, I now get to . . . do it again, and again, and again. *And I need some place that understands that*, and that is why I am here, more than any other reason, except that destiny or something seems to have put me here, and you, and each of us, and what fools we would be to say we understand fully what is going on, because we don't.

But I am more than I was, and I must be more than I am. And I need you to understand that, and you need me to understand that. You and I and we together are evolving. How often we lock each other into some kind of changeless stasis! Let us never allow this place to become a force that locks us into our individual pasts.

Let this be a community whose pores are open to the divine wind; — where people don't just sit around staying the same — but evolve, and *become*.

To become something more than the sum total of our past. It's the color that comes into being in this territory where the light and the dark meet, where all these forces and demands call us into being.

Frances Wickes put it this way: —

The victim who is nailed to his own dead past is crucified on the tree of death, which will never flower into a tree of new life, and the victim is a useless sacrifice to an ancient unchanging image of an untransformed and untransforming god, who has lost the power of creation and recreation.

But that is not to say that the outworn gods and myths of past ages and stages of our evolving consciousness — have no power at all:

No, those gods are out there right now, powerful, the pull of a past that is too small for us, and too mean, and too narrow.

The zealots' dreams of conquest, the notion that it's okay and even necessary to punish and obliterate the infidels who cannot identify with your myth or don't belong to your divinely-chosen tribe —

Intelligent people, people who think they're doing right — are still today tragically programmed by these archaic and barbaric gods and myths, Israel versus Palestine, in Pakistan and Iraq and Iran, in the fringe religious sects that for so long seemed able to dictate the domestic and the foreign policies of the United States.

Or that presidential candidate who wants to change the Constitution to match the changeless demands of an archaic god who never grew up, never evolved.

Oh yes, those untransformed and untransforming gods have not left us, and they still hang around our individual lives and our public life. But our responsibility as a religious movement is to lift up a finer, grander vision.

To be a place of transformation. To create here a *culture* of transformation. A place where you will be understood and supported in your passage; and, moreover, where the journey itself is valued highly, where different, and finer, values prevail. But more on that next week.



So finally one day I ask myself: why this impulse toward transformation? Why can't I just have some peace and quiet? What's all this upheaval about, and why is the impossible asked of us?

A few days ago I was reading the great evolutionary paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin, and came across a passage where he says: "what [matters] is that we should be told that, at the cost of what we are enduring, life is taking a step, and a decisive step, in us and in our environment."



All my life I was saturated with religious messages about a heaven or nirvana to come when all would be quiet, peaceful harmony. But that dream I had was saying something else. Haven't our lives taught us?

There is peace, and light, and joy, yes there is. In deep states of meditation, you and I can enter that Ground of Being beyond time and turmoil and all of our own personal problems. In the midst of the tension we can always find the silence —

We can place ourselves in such communion of silence

and become aware

of the immensity beyond the silence that is *always, already* there, that moves in the turmoil and tension and demands.

But it awaits there not to leave us as it found us, but

to call forth all the colors of what we can be

and must be.

If we want to engage life, if we want the experience of Spirit, we're looking in the

wrong place if we're looking for a way out. Life invites us, life needs us, to live at the very edge of the possible — and sometimes it's going to look *impossible*.

The energy and intelligence that made this universe isn't finished and isn't ever going to be finished, and you and I are a part of it. And the invitation to you and me is to engage this life-process fully, at the deepest level. To participate in it. Life at its core is inherently surging forth, always moving, has an unrelent-

ing intensity about it. That creative energy that gave us life and made us conscious now needs us, needs our own highest potentials. It constantly, inexorably, challenges us to develop those potentials, to become more than we have been, to continue the work of creation.

¹ Third edition. Boston: Sigo Press, 1988, p. 244.

² *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology* (Collected Works, 7), pp. 47f.