

## Pondering the Imponderable Ploughshare

Funny how a sermon is often a sword and rarely a ploughshare. A sword pretends to take care of matters. Violence loves to pretend to end things. A ploughshare is different. A ploughshare cultivates ground and opens space for perpetual beginnings. Swords obviously are instruments of war – the kind that always pretend to resolve things. Ploughshares are the instruments of peace. They till the soil to provide us food.

Because I am firmly convinced I have to do something different, somehow, and because I know the Spirits approved, today I want to do a ploughshare sermon. Just cultivation, no resolution.

Like Maria Therez Alves, who helped found Brazil's green party and who just won a prize exploring human migration as seeds distributed inadvertently around the world in the holds of Cargo ships, we toss the seed into well prepared ground. (Vera List Center Prize for Art and Politics.)

Judson, like other congregations and communities, is fundamentally a place of cultivation. We aerate the ground with art and action and spirit. We keep the clods less firm. Like Pedro Reyes, the Mexican artist, we don't arm. We disarm. Disarm is a second generation of instruments built after Imagine (2012), also using the remnants of weapons that the Mexican army had collected and destroyed. The second series is made up of eight instruments that were created in collaboration with a team musicians and Cocolab, a media studio in Mexico City. These machines are mechanical musical instruments; they can be programmed and operated via computers, making them capable of performing music concerts with compositions prepared beforehand.

The various parts of these automatons are recognizable as shotguns, pistols and rifles; while they no longer pose the threat of physical harm, they keep the sheer might of their most recent purpose. Now, these former arms strum, ring, crash, hum, and vibrate at different volumes and intensities to express elaborate compositions with a wide range of sonic nuances.

Making art about guns, you can easily be seduced by the object itself, so the result may wind up praising or glorifying the object rather than critiquing it. Because of the pacifist purpose of this project, the message has to be clear so that the idea has currency for a general audience.

Like a good poem or a good haiku, art is often nothing more or less than a moment of insight; when an object or image is seen in a new light or when something is

added or revealed in a meaningful way. I asked someone I love how to preach the nugget of this prophetically Advent text about swords being beaten into ploughshares. She said focus on the verb, "Beaten." Say that the process of going from harm to dis harm is almost violent itself, say that turning something that is hurtful into something that is helpful is a kind of transformation that won't feel just good. You may also feel beaten down in the process. If you are the ground, you probably don't enjoy being tilled.

We are in the moment when the narrative of first world exceptionalism is in deep global collision with the narrative of global democratic participation. Guns are involved.

Zadie Smith speaks of the unbearable cruelty of proofs, of seeing what you thought was right a year after you've written it and wondering if it was wrong even then. We have become afraid of the very stories that we have told about our very selves as well as the stories we have told about each other. To give you a ploughshare kind of sermon, a cultivating, aerating open one, I have to tell stories.

Ivan Koychinnikov, an architect, puts the poetry this way: "I like to say, 'we don't build houses, we just frame the view outside the window.'"

First I'll tell you about Kuldip. He has given permission often for me to tell his story. He is in detention in Jersey now, on his way to deportation to India. He was picked up at his check-in on Friday. We'll never know why he didn't ask someone to go with him – as we have on multiple occasions. Would our accompaniment have made a difference? Who knows. When a suicide occurs, people often want to assure themselves that if they had just been there, everything would be different. That is probably not true but it's sword level control helps us deal with what cannot be imagined or even pondered. His wife is in Virginia, living in a trailer with an old man, for whom she cares in exchange for rent, and her two-year-old son, who is also Kuldip's two-year-old son. His wife is a white Southerner if her accent is any indication. Kuldip is Muslim and makes 500 a week, under the table, driving a truck, when he can get work. He does not have a driver's license.

Stephanie gets a little money from Kuldip, who lives in a room with two other men in Queens. Because she loves him, on Saturday she was holding a yard sale in her trailer park, to post bail for him. By the way, she can't post bail for him. Sometimes the facts just don't matter.

Kuldip has been calling me from the detention center on one of the entrepreneurial businesses that has developed around detention centers. Basically, you pay for any phone calls you make at about 4.00 per minute, unless you can get someone to receive your collect call at the same rate. Right now there are ways to change Kuldip's narrative and Stephanie's narrative and their child's narrative and the narrative of the old man who Stephanie attends in order to sleep on the couch with

her son in his trailer. The way is legal and papers have been filed. It is called a “Stay of Removal,” and it will buy him some time. This is the daily work of the New Sanctuary Movement, which is basically a defense team. Why bring up the word defense? Or stays of removal? Because I have petitioned spiritually for a stay of confusion and hope to be out of detention soon myself.

The word defense seems to be on everyone’s lips. Defense is what you play when you have no offensive game. Sanctuary is defense, whether it occurs in the active form of accompaniment or the passive form of offering more space than you have for immigrants to gather and organize. Thursday night the week before Thanksgiving this room held a gathering of 37 undocumented people who took the bold decision of going to ICE in person and asking for working papers. I was impressed with the leadership of women and mothers in the group. The meal was superb, roasted chickens with their heads still on. I told you I was going to tell stories.

Our meditation text for the day deserves meditation. From the Japanese artist, Kaori Homma, it well describes a moment of pause. Note she says that July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1945 was unthinkable. That is another word for imponderable. The unthinkable is the imponderable. For Stephanie, what is happening is unthinkable. Perhaps it is for some of you all as well.

Kimberle’ Crenshaw gave us a big word, the word intersectionality. I never liked it and kept reaching for a word more metaphorical or spiritual sounding. But Crenshaw’s language actually lasts. She says an intersection is where the roads come together. She says there are places where discrimination and oppression join each other. We all know this as the near cliché of women who are people of color having double jeopardy

The roads are coming together if you just look a second – and that is the good news of this enormously dense moment. On any given day, I can’t figure out which injury to attend first. The ordinary ones, of living and dying and being sick and getting well. The extraordinary ones, of climate catastrophe and immigration and trade deals and mayor/governor spats, traffic jams and black Fridays. The new ones of leadership looking under every rock for a strategy and a way forward.

Let me give intersectionality more of a face. President Obama pardoned a lot of turkeys on Thursday. He could have pardoned a few immigrant rights leaders as well. If you want to join the very active national movement to get Ravi Ragbir, a Judson member and ED of NSM, a pardon, speak to me. You might also help his wife, who is an immigration lawyer, stop crying. She knows what is about to happen. And it is a turkey on a plate, with its head cut off. You might see the New Sanctuary Movement as threatened with having its head cut off too.

More stories just to turn up the cultivation heat. We turned down 10 groups who wanted to meet and gather in sacred space every day last week. Many of them were our friends. Our new partners, LabSchul, found their rabbi leaving for Israel to meditate for three weeks about whether he could be a Jew and refuse intermarriage any longer. The Muslim Community Network's self defense for women sold out in 4 hours. The Syrian war continues with no end in sight.

Most of us wonder whether the little that we can do is even worth doing. We are in our powerless phase. Raoul Wallenberg only set up 31 safe. Kaori Humma only charred a dozen or so surfaces, as a way to show us what she calls the unthinkable houses. What a piker.

The obvious question for us, here, now is this: What will Judson do differently? If I hear the conversations among us and within us, correctly, I think we will become more a center of cultivation of outsiders and their moments of insight, through art and action. Call us a sanctuary for Spirit, art and action. Let our verb be cultivation.

I imagine our staff meeting on Wednesday was right: We are going to have to be even more open and more focused than we have been. We will probably curate more to the cultivation of artists and activists who have an intersectional viewpoint. We will probably have to learn to rent our space less and invite to it more. That is a policy change about which we will have to think and quarrel a good bit. BTW the pledge campaign is going very well. We are clearly having a catastrophe bump. There is plenty of room for you to join the fun – especially if you think Judson needs to be the best port in a storm we can be and needs to avoid being a fort in the storm. Thank you, Rabbi Aichai. Porting not forting.

We can't afford to worry only about our own income streams right now. We need to be an income stream. We need to be a safe house. We need to play defense and protect people who are in trouble. We need to note that we are also people in trouble and not overdo our importance or underdo the stewardship of our great crossroads space, at the intersection of the intersections.

Why will we make this organizational shift, which is really not a shift at all but what happens when a good soup broth becomes condensed and delicious? Because we love New York City and its sharpness and its edginess and its inevitable leadership in national religious organizations and political organizations. What people come here to cultivate in each other is crucial. We need to not only keep this space open but also open it up even more. Why? So that people can cultivate themselves, each other and new and more powerful moments of insight and action.

You may or may not have seen the new Judson web site. It has been a long time coming. And it is only I Beta. By the way it will always be in Beta. It has a secret inside it. Go look for the pink unicorn. Make its acquaintance. Cultivate it.

Why are we here? We are here to distribute seeds. We are here to collect arms and turn them into musical instruments. We are here to be a safe house. We are here to think about the unthinkable, ponder the un-ponderable and make sure that what happens next is a great and wonderful surprise, not a great and terrible surprise. We are here to mutually care for each other, to lean on each other to hold each other up. We are here to cultivate ourselves for rich action as and here to allow right action to cultivate our communities and ourselves. We are here for Kuldip. We are here because Black Lives Matter. We are here for people who want to enjoy life and choice and gender innovation in thought and action. We are here to redeem the religious words sanctuary and asylum and refugee and stranger and more. We are who we are because the people before us who stewarded this place were who they were. We have a heritage of uncensored experimentation. We like to have fun too.

What I will be doing issue wise in the next period is writing and acting around the climate catastrophe, protecting the strangers among us through experimental sanctuaries of all kinds, and working on the stewardship of this great treasure of real estate that we have. That's just me: Environment, sanctuary and the Judson Buildings. If any of you want to help me in any of these areas, I NEED HELP.

There is a larger meaning to cultivation than my own renewed focus. I am here and you are here and we are here to help each other focus and take a piece of the enormous pie. That is the larger meaning of cultivation – how we help each other focus and act and think and become our best and most sustainable selves. In each of my foci, my job is to find others and to cultivate their best selves. That means getting lots more sanctuary churches. Lots more people to love nature so much that they can't stop protecting it. It also means executive leadership for this place for the next Reformation and its ongoing work of cultivation from a crossroads.

(The Moth Snowstorm: Nature and Joy, by Michael McCarthy, New York Review Books, 2016. He wants to save nature for the joy of it.)

Rabbi Amichai says this all in a nutshell: we need to be a port not a fort.