

UUA General Assembly 98  
Text of the Sermon "Second Movement"  
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So why did the chicken cross the road anyway? The usual answer is that the chicken crossed the road in order to get to the other side the usual answer, that is, if you are a kindergarten student. The following list offers a different set of explanations for road crossing by chickens. It was originally part of an e-mail that was forwarded to me at All Souls.

Karl Marx: Road crossing is an historically inevitable pattern of chicken behavior.

Margaret Thatcher: The chicken crossed over to the other side because it went wobbly.

Richard Nixon: The chicken did not cross the road. I repeat, the chicken did NOT cross the road.

Ralph Waldo Emerson: The chicken did not cross the road, it transcended it.

Martin Luther King, Jr: I envision a world where all chickens will be free to cross roads without having their motives called into question.

Bill Gates: I have just released Chicken Office 2000, which will not only cross roads, but will collect eggs, automatically update inventory records, and make payroll tax deposits.

Ernest Hemingway: The chicken crossed the road to die. Alone. In the rain.

Colonel Sanders: I missed one?

The only valid conclusion one can draw from these explanations has nothing at all to do with chickens, of course. It has to do with human beings: men and women like you and me. It illustrates how much time we spend thinking about why things happen not just philosophers and theologians, but also social workers and family therapists, research scientists and financial analysts, psychologists in private practice and educators in public schools. Everyone wants to know why: why did this child drop out and that one win a scholarship, why did this business fail and that stock rise, why did this disease spread and that relationship collapse? Why can't I worry less and enjoy life more?

Why did the chicken cross the road? Why is the question which defines the vast human space between the chickens who don't know the questions and whatever god knows all the answers. We ask why, and that's what makes us human.

The same question permeates our life together here at General Assembly. Why has our movement grown so much yet expanded so little? Why do our actions as an Association so often fail to embody our ideals as a community? Why is it so hard to find a decent place to eat dinner that won't make you wait for a week and charge you a mint?

The point is that here and elsewhere we reveal our concerns about purpose and meaning by thinking in two ways, one of which I would call strategic, the other synthetic. Strategic thinking is the opening gambit: it sets a goal becoming an anti-racist faith community, renewing our covenant with each other and devises a plan, a sequence of causes and consequences, that we expect will lead us from here to there. We base our strategic plan on an amalgam of history and hope, knowing that things will not go as scripted, but also that with flexibility and tenacity we can probably mostly get where we want to go.

If strategy launches our thinking, then synthesis prepares the landing. It's a pulling together of all the strands in our life together and making a meaningful and coherent whole out of them. And in this movement, there are a lot of strands to pull together. Just look at the diverse sources from which we draw nourishment, and the many uses to which we put our energies. There are many ways in which we are not diverse, but theology is not one of those ways. The problem isn't finding the variations, but locating the unifying theme.

At the personal level, the process of synthesis is about finding a way to unite body and spirit and mind with experience, so that together the many facets of our lives become one meaningful whole. As a faith community, the task is much the same. It's about taking our individual beliefs and backgrounds, our diverse cultures and shared commitments, our scattered congregations and common institutions, and making them more than the sum of the parts. At its best, that's what religion helps us do: tie everything together. As you know, that's precisely what the word religion means: to tie back together.

The problem is that an obsession with strategy and synthesis will ultimately leave us feeling empty and dissatisfied, because strategy is mostly about the future and synthesis is mostly about the past. Both are necessary, at least in reasonable doses, but both also divert our attention from the present, from what happens on the road we are crossing, no matter why or how we are crossing it. After all, life is not primarily an agenda to be followed or a technique to be learned or a program to be implemented or a project to be planned. It's a series of brief moments of experience that we either seize as they pass or look back only to discover them lost forever.

One of my favorite stories from the Hebrew Bible is about the prophet Elijah.

We find him distraught, his career in a shambles, because the people to whom he had been preaching were living wickedly as ever. Elijah deemed his life barely worth living and fled to a distant mountain to think about life for a while. As he sat there, God came to him and posed a question. The question had nothing to do with his performance in the past or his plans for the future. And the question came not in the power of wind nor with the drama of an earthquake nor the heat of great fire. It came only in the sound of sheer silence. In the silence God asked, What are you doing here, Elijah? What are you doing here? The biggest questions are not about the past or the future. They are about the present. At each moment, wherever we happen to be, the question is the same: what are you and I doing here?

Over the past few months, as I have been listening again to some symphonies I like a lot, I have found myself unusually attracted to the second movement of several of them. When I noticed the pattern, I began to wonder why. It occurs to me that the first and fourth movements of a symphony each have a specific job to do. The first movement sets the agenda, establishes the

plan of action defines a musical strategy, one might say. The fourth movement has a synthetic role: pulling together and summing up what has gone before. But the middle movements have no such constraints; they are more or less free to be whatever they want to be. Rather than either launching or landing a musical line, they are free to meander about in the musical landscape, to explore the depth and texture of the terrain.

A musician friend puts it more adeptly and more succinctly. The first movement of a symphony, she says, is about getting in. The second movement is about being there. The third is about realizing that there is somewhere else to be. The fourth is about getting out. Getting in. Being there. Realizing there is somewhere else to be. Getting out.

Maybe the reason I have been attracted to second movements is that they teach me to focus on being there wherever I happen to be. For me that's the real challenge. Whether the moment at hand is a plenary or a potluck supper or a soup kitchen, the business of getting in and getting out mostly takes care of itself. A workshop begins; a dinner ends. A day begins; a church year ends. For that matter, life begins, and life ends. These beginnings and endings are eternal verities of our existence, whether we pay attention or not. As to the third movement, in life as in music, there is always somewhere else we could be. At this moment, I could be in Rome or Rwanda or back at my hotel in bed.

However, the fact that I could be somewhere else is not all that important not even all that interesting. I am here, now as are you. What are we doing here?

I'm convinced that the key to life is the second movement: fully being wherever we are. It's the part about development, about texture and depth.

Not about getting in or getting out or being somewhere else, but about being here. It's about paying attention when a colleague seems down or at loose ends. It's about noticing the hue in the early morning sky or hearing the sound of a broken heart. It's about knowing the high cost of love and the generous dividends of friendship. The travesty of a child who has the ability but not the opportunity. The tragedy of injustice and the horror of being invisible. Today, in this moment, the main challenge you and I face is being here for ourselves and for each other.

After all, the basis of our covenant with each other, and the foundation of our commitment to anti-racism is not the time we spend together strategizing and synthesizing, but a shared commitment to being here together as one people transparent to the struggle of becoming fully human. Audre Lorde describes this spirit of deep sharing and intimate connection as forming a bridge between the shar-ers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and can lessen the threat of their differences. Deep sharing, intimate connection: at every moment in faith as in life, that is what we are doing here. That is what ties it all back together.

Why did the chicken cross the road? My own guess is that she crossed the road because that's where she was: at the road. The chicken was paying attention, as it were; she was simply being where she was. She knew the road was for crossing and not for laying eggs on. Just as friends are for talking, and colleagues for listening, and flowers for smelling, and runny noses for

wiping. And music is for enjoying, and laughter for sharing, and sunsets for wondering at. And worries are for caring, and problems for solving, and rainy days for reading, and bumble bees for watching.

And resolutions are for debating and issues for confronting and votes for taking and stands for making. And roads? They are for crossing if you are a chicken and driving on if you are not. If we pay attention, we'll almost always know which to do.

*Reported from text submitted by Galen Guengerich*