

STATE OF THE MOVEMENT ADDRESS: CALLED TO WALK IN THE WAY

1. The way I experience the movement nowadays is a sheer, overwhelming complexity. But it's a strange kind of complexity, or at least that's the way it comes to me, because it's been occasioned by what I thought was going to be a new focus around which we were going to be able to operate. Some of us thought the Local Church Project was going to be a new kind of focus. Then the strange thing is that what you thought was going to be a focus turns again to spin you off and throw you out in a hundred different directions.
2. It's sort of like the movie "Andromeda Strain". I don't know how many of you saw it but there's really only one great scene in it. That's when the scientists discover this virus that they'd been hunting for for nights and nights. They gather around this little microscope, and they're sitting there awestruck because it's pulsating, and all of a sudden the thing subdivides into six different things. The response of the scientists is a kind of gasp and "My God!"
3. That's sort of the way I experience the movement nowadays, and the local church project. It surely is that kind of pulsating thing, and you look at it one minute and there it is focused, and then all of a sudden it is several different pieces. I guess that's actually what happens isn't it, in terms of the galaxy? Anyhow, it's the way in which the Project itself throws you back into recruiting, throws you back into pedagogy. I knew we weren't ever going to be finished with pedagogy, but I thought we were finished with it in terms of major emphasis, and here you are thrown back into that again. Or thrown back into metro structures. And you can go down the line into one thing after another.
4. I suppose when it finally hits you is when all that complexity and overwhelmingness hits you personally smack in the face. That happened to me this fall when my religious house prior came over. You've always got to be careful to watch when they're wearing their "regional hat" and when they're wearing their "auxiliary hat" because the regional hat always comes to me as a dangerous kind of thing. But I wasn't watching very carefully that particular morning. What happened was that first they said something like, "Well, with the kind of demands you're facing, it looks to me like you ought to give up the metro coordinator position." I remember my response was something like, "Funny you should say that before I had a chance." But that really threw me off guard. I thought, "Finally he has seen that the local church project is the place where I can slip into my niche and do my job, and relieve myself of some of those other roles that it seems I've been playing for years."
5. Then I began to engage in a conversation about how important pedagogy was in the region and what a tool for formulation it had been in times back, and how it might well be that the time had come again for a new sort of emphasis on pedagogy. Well, I may be naive, but I'm not that naive. When that part of the conversation began to come up, I began to have my suspicions, and sure enough, before the morning ended I was faculty coordinator for the New York region. I'm not quite sure how that happened, but again I'm clear that this project simply throws you back into the overwhelming complexity of the demand that's there.

6. We all know that we've all experienced an intensification of the demand but where the bite comes for me is that it's very clear that the kind of intensification of the demand is never going to stop, as far as you and I can see into the future in terms of the movement. I don't see any other alternative. It used to be, when you had a rough quarter that you thought maybe the next quarter would be better--it couldn't be as bad as the last one. I don't know where it was I got over-expecting that kind of change, but I remember very clearly where it got dramatized to me. I was having a conversation with a colleague in a restaurant, and we were reflecting and evaluating back on the quarter. And he said something like "I experienced the quarter as just one unbelievable demand after another, and just as soon as one thing was over, there was a shove in some other direction." I remember saying (I thought it was just sort of an off-the-cuff comment) something like "Well, as far as I can see clear into the future, it's always going to be that way." I didn't realize the power of that comment until he dropped his coffee cup and collapsed over the table. And it became apparent from the fact that the conversation was repeated on a number of other occasions, that that was a very powerful kind of statement for that guy. It occurred to me that somewhere along the line I had just begun to assume that. If you haven't begun to assume that, now would be as good a time as any because that's the way it's going to be.

7. The overwhelmingness of the complexity has thrown us into a kind of semi-paralysis and it's a strange kind of thing because exciting things are going on, it isn't that we're not moving. You have to say that we won, that we were successful, that what's happening is what we said needed to happen. And yet it's underneath that subtle kind of malaise that despair grew up in many of us. I've tried to reflect on that because it seems to me that that is the most crucial thing that's going on in our spirit journey as a movement.

8. For me that raises the question in the midst of this complexity, of the one thing that we're about as a movement. When we find the answer to that question, that will sustain us over the long haul. It's sure not going to be a project of any one kind of task. But what is the one thing we are about? In other words, as I experience the kind of crisis we have in our own internal life these days, it's a crisis that has to do with chastity, with purity of heart, if you will. How is it in the midst of recruiting, in the midst of wrestling with the new social vehicle, in the midst of spirit conversations, in the midst of the local church project that there is just one thing that we are about?

9. In terms of these four days here, some of us experience that especially critically because we came to one thing and then got in something else. At least I sure did think I was coming out here to the Advanced School. Matter of fact, I was so convinced of that that I actually did my home work. My wife and I sat up for a whole day and listed the sorts of questions we wanted to raise in the Advanced School. Then when I walked in I found that I was going to teach in the Basic School. And it's dramatized for me again in the midst of the complexity that we are about just one thing. As a matter of fact, when I got commissioned to come over here to give this lecture, after I had just finished another lecture, they said something like "You need to go and do that same thing".

10. How is it that we're about just one thing in history? Or how is it that the local church project is about just one thing? And so I want to talk about that a little this morning and reflect on it. In one sense this isn't going to be anything new, I'm sure. But that as I look at the complexity and ask myself, "What is the one thing we are about?" it comes back over and over again that what we are about is being, or that what we are about is being a certain kind of style in history, being a certain kind of presence in the world, having--but having isn't really right--it's being a way, being a way in history. And for me the reason that the song "Called to Walk in the Way" is so powerful is because that's what it's all about. In the midst of all that complexity, it's about walking a particular kind of way, and then embodying or being that way in history for the sake of all men. It's being the way of possibility, it's being the way of the open future, it's being the way of the new life, it's being the way of the crucifixion at the same time that it's resurrection. It's being the way of the ascending path rather than the descending path.

11. I guess one of the people in my meditative council reminds me of that over and over again is a guy by the name of Bojangles. He came into my consciousness in a popular song, (you know how fickle our culture is--he's gone now in terms of popular song, but he's still part of my meditative council). He traveled, all over the place. He was really a global man in terms of his traveling. The way they put it in the song was that he traveled all through the South. And wherever he went he ran into people for whom life had become just one thing after another, whose eyes had become focused on the treadmill and their feet, and the humdrum routine of what life had become for them. What Bojangles did, everytime he arrived on that kind of scene was a dance. Not only did he do a dance, but he clicked his heels. So they say that the story began to spread about him, and wherever he went people would gather around him and beg him to dance. There was a new vision, a new sense that there was a future for people, and that happened, so they say, in his travels through all the South.

12. The way the question gets raised for me is as I look at the style of life that is the predominant style of my laymen, and the kind of shift that sometimes takes place. There's one particular man I have in mind. He's a great man, a man of passion and care and concern. For 45 years his life has been focused in and grounded in himself, not because that's where he wanted the passion to be directed, but because he didn't know any other way to direct or focus it. We sat down one night to talk about his experience, and the future of the church, and there was a strange kind of twinkle in his eye that I hadn't seen there before. He began to talk rather excitedly and he ended by saying, "Never before in my whole lifetime have I seen that I could do something important, even world-shaking." Now my first response to that still is unbelievable dismay. How is it that a man could be in the church of Jesus Christ for 45 years and never have heard the freeing Word that he had permission to be the greatness that he was? How does that happen? And yet, the other side of that is that at this point of his life he has caught a glimpse of his greatness, a glimpse that his life could really count for something and can count for something, a glimpse that he can be the greatness and significance he in fact is.

13. That's what it is to be the way that we are, it seems to me. That's the one thing we are about. Everything we do is to give people permission to create tomorrow the new face of the planet Earth. It seems to me that if we're inviting people to anything less than genuinely participating in the whole globe, the future of the globe, then we're the most ridiculous of all people. And that, in the midst of the complexity, is what we're all about.

14. I experience being that way in the strangest forms. I recall one time not so long ago having to make a hospital visit. I knew the lady had cancer that was eating her up. I just had one thing to do in that situation, and that was to be the presence, the new life in the face of what she was going through. She was down in the solarium. There she was with this big smile on her face, knitting away and talking with other people, and that threw me a little bit. I sat down, and somehow the style of how she was appropriating what was happening to her completely threw me off the track. Finally I just completely lost my nerve and began to talk about what she was going through. You know how sometimes you hear yourself talking and can't believe what you are saying. I couldn't believe what was coming out. I pulled out all the stuff about great research in cancer these days and they're really going to find something, the doctors are going to be very helpful. I didn't get too far, thank goodness, because she put her hand on my arm and said "Don't do that." She said, "I know what it is I have to face, and the only thing I have to deal with is coming to terms with what I have on my hands. So don't tell me that other stuff." Well, it's very strange when you're out to be the Way and someone else invites you back again, to be the Way, but however it is that you talk about the one thing we're about, and however it is you experience it these days, it's back pretty much to rock bottom.

15. I remember being bowled over by Marshall one time when he said "The spirit movement is about as close to nothing as you can get." It is. It's just calling people to make decisions. All it is is spirit. All it is about is transformed human lives, that's all. On the one hand that's very grandiose; on the other hand it's very simple. Like what would happen in the church these days if the sort of singing that went on here would happen in every local congregation? What would happen to people's lives if Sunday after Sunday and week after week they experienced that? Or what would happen if they heard the Scriptures in the kind of way we're beginning to recover and experience the Scriptures?

16. And yet I guess we've learned in this movement that our significance, the significance of what we're about is not attached to any model, any method, any people, any project. When you discover that, then the question is, what is it that sustains you if it's not the one thing that you're about?

17. So what's the state of the movement? Well, I guess for me the state of the movement is what it's always been--a growing, thriving, throbbing, pulsating, intensified shove into the future. That's all the movement's ever been. But very different in the state of the movement is a new kind of struggle to remember in the midst of that pulsating hunk of momentum into the future what it is that we're about, and that we're about nothing other than giving people permission, telling them to be the greatness that they are. I do not believe for myself that it is going to be structures that sustain us, though we're going to have to have structures. It is not going to be discipline, though we're going to have to have discipline. It's surely not going to be projects and tasks that sustain us. None of those are going to hold us in being. It's only remembering the single thing that we are about in history. That's why we need to keep singing again and again and again the song that has the most to do with what that one thing is,

"CALLED TO WALK IN THE WAY OF THE MAN WHO STILLED THE WATER."

--Don Steinle