Excerpts Sacred Secular – Dottie Escobedo-Frank & Rob Rynders

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Excerpt 1

So I’ve been wondering about what the church is doing and why and if our existence is being questioned by culture. Especially when “welcome” is felt so deeply elsewhere. And I’ve been wondering: when did the church get the idea that doing worship without enthusiasm was “cool”? John Wesley wrote directions for singing, which are included in the front of the *United Methodist Hymnal*. He says,

IV. Sing lustily and with good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sung the songs of Satan.[[1]](#footnote-1)

And if by chance some were too enthralled with the sound of their own voice, Wesley reminds them,

VII. Above all sing *spiritually*. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to this attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your *Heart* is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the *Lord* will approve of here, and reward when he cometh in the clouds of heaven. [[2]](#footnote-2)

There are more instructions, but these two attend to the problems of being too disengaged with singing/praising in worship and the problem of being too full of yourself and your sound when you “worship.” Both are problems in our churches today. Not in every church, of course, but in some churches. In many churches.

Excerpt #2

So I’ve been wondering if the church is missing herself. Missing her young, her bright ideas, her lost-who-can-be-found, her hopeless-needing-hope. Have we become like the Empty Nesters who once knew the fullness of home but now are experiencing separation anxiety as the young leave and come home only for momentary visits? Is the sound of our Silent Night becoming literal, echoing a whisper of hope in the world full of the cacophony of diverse shouts?

Jesus said to the Pharisees that the rocks would shout out if we didn’t bring our full-on praise. Some churches are, thankfully, places of prayer and worship and praise, where people can find God in a troubled world. I am so grateful for them. And some of our churches are fading, and I am both grateful for their history and sad for their current state of affairs. It is time for us to pay attention. It is possible God is up to something we know not of, and if we stop and listen, we just might find a new way.

So, we are looking—and learning—from the places where the rocks are crying out.

Excerpt #3

**Modern-Day Preachers**

Is there any learning that is needed for the church around preaching and getting the message out? I think there is.

First of all, our delivery needs to be the best we have. The “best” means we prepare our sermons well, that we preach in the style that is congruent with our personalities, and that we are passionate about the message. It would be a good thing to stop preaching about that which we have no passion. Steven Pressfield, in *TheWar of Art*, says we let resistance wreck our purpose:

If you believe God (and I do) you must declare Resistance evil, for it prevents us from achieving the life God intended when He endowed each of us with our own unique genius. *Genius* is a Latin word: the Romans used it to denote an inner spirit, holy and inviolable, which watches over us, guiding us to our calling. A writer writes with his *genius;* an artist paints with hers; everyone who creates operates from this sacramental center. It is our soul’s seat, the vessel that holds our being-in-potential, our star’s beacon and Polaris.[[3]](#footnote-3)

And I would add, a preacher preaches with his or her genius.

Resistance happens when we put off preparation for preaching and allow other “urgent” things to rob us of our central gift. Pressfield states the Rule of Thumb is, “The more important a call or action to our soul’s evolution, the more Resistance we will feel toward pursuing it.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Preaching is different from the world’s messages if we bring the hope of Christ and the love of God into the world. Do not negate the importance of your work! And remember, preachers are at our best when we are the ones who have been changed by the good news.

Some preachers are not excellent orators; however, if our words are sincere and our lives are transparent and genuine, people will hear. We can always learn to become better at speaking in public, and there are many avenues to learn. One of my favorite places for preachers to hone their speaking ability is Toastmasters. These small groups work at building confidence and teaching the speaker to think on his or her feet. They lovingly correct, encourage, and call out the best in everyone in the group. Don’t be ashamed to join a group such as Toastmasters if you hear that there is room for improvement. The role you play is that important.

Preachers can work to make their sermons shorter in some settings. However, remembering this is a cultural context, in some places, shorter would not work. But whether short or long, preachers can be sure of their message, of the direction and flow of delivery, and of having an attention-getting opener and a meaningful closing moment, and a message that matters. Jesus used story and metaphor, and I believe that today, this is still what transforms us. Storytelling is so important as a tool that George Fox Evangelical Seminary is leading a Doctorate of Ministry track called Preaching as Story.[[5]](#footnote-5)

We can practice the artistry of preaching until the crowd that hears us is anxious and excited about receiving God’s word week after week. That may mean we have to let go of the things that bind us and keep us from spending time in preparation and practice. Instead, we can be constrained to guard the time we need to make the gathering of the people worth every minute.

We can also join our efforts to make our messages readily available in a time when people may choose not to be in a Sunday gathering every week. Sermons can be readily available on the web so that people can hear when they are traveling, working, or unable to attend for whatever reason. Some churches are live-streaming their weekly services and are watching their count of attendance rise in the virtual realm. Some churches are even meeting virtually. In “Second Life,”[[6]](#footnote-6) an Internet meeting site, church services occur in the chapel throughout the week. People attend as an avatar and hear music and sermons, and engage in mission opportunities. People who attend these virtual services are those who would never choose to attend the brick-and-mortar church building. Being open to new ways of preaching and bringing faith to our culture is crucial if we want to maintain a stance of relevance. Because, the truth is, we won’t be relevant if we cannot be heard.

Excerpt #4

**Jesus and the Religious Authority**

Jesus didn’t mince words when he spoke to the religious authorities of his day. In Matthew 23, he condemns the Pharisees and the legal experts of the law with harsh words. He calls them “blind guides” (23:16), “hypocrites” (23:23), “whitewashed tombs” (23:27), and “snakes” and “children of snakes” (23:33). He condemns them for sending money overseas without following through on raising up people who follow after the heart of God. He condemns them for requiring a tithe while forgetting the law of “justice, peace and faith” (23:23). He calls out what is wrong in the religious circles of his day.

If we were to follow in the example of Jesus, perhaps we would need to call out what is wrong in our churches and what is not working anymore. What is wrong could be things like hypocrisy, judgmental attitudes, hate-mongering of people who are not “like us,” and the non-welcoming religio-political stance toward immigrants in our midst. Jesus might join the crowds of NONES or SBNR (spiritual but not religious), whose critique for the church leaves a dirty taste in their mouths. Sometimes I get it—their message—and I almost agree.

I don’t fully agree, however. And that is because of hope. I have hope that God is up to something that is changing us and that change is something we cannot form or shape to our benefit. That change is God molding us into a new creation, a new church. It hurts to be shaped, and it definitely is not comfortable. But when we yield to the hands of the Creative One, then our pain of change will be worth it.

Change is something we love to fight. The first chapter of *Being Wrong,* titled “Wrongology,” begins with a quote by Moliere, “It infuriates me to be wrong when I know I’m right.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Schulz states,

And far from being a mark of indifference or intolerance, wrongness is a vital part of how we learn and change. Thanks to error, we can revise our understanding of ourselves and amend our ideas about the world.[[8]](#footnote-8)

We are in that period of the church. The time when we need to revise our traditional understanding of “church” and figure out where we need to change to meet the needs of a world that has changed drastically.

In *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard*, Heath and Heath outline how to make a switch. Some important focuses are looking for the bright places and being sure of which moves are critical. The change processes they outline are important considerations as one moves away from the well-known and well-weathered path, and chooses to forge a new way forward.[[9]](#footnote-9) I recommend the whole book to you as we begin to imagine together and take steps that will transform us so that our world can once again hear the message of God’s love in our own voice. It’s not that we are not heard at all, but it is that our voice is growing dim, and we need to pay attention. God’s hope is what keeps me going. And when I see signs of the church surviving and thriving in places other than the church, I am both bewildered and curious. When I imagine a church that has a strong component of social media and crowdsourcing, I first think of all the problems with that model. But when I quiet my critical voice down and give it the calming balm of hope, I find that I am glad to be here to witness what God is up to in this day. I have children and grandchildren, and it matters to me that they can connect to God and God’s church in their lives.

Excerpt #5

**Second Life**

I was introduced to Second Life in the academic setting. While working on my Doctorate of Ministry, we were required to do an online class in Second Life. I was the oldest in my cohort, and the least computer savvy, so I had to get help from my younger classmates to figure out how to attend class. They set up my computer to land in the area of the chapel, where we would meet at a certain time on a certain day. Each of us chose an avatar (mine was a youngish student with brown hair and green eyes) for our presence in this virtual world, but the voices were our own, connected through the headsets we plugged in to the computer. The person who set up my computer got me close to the chapel, but not right in it. So I learned that when I entered Second Life, I automatically landed on this cliff. And all I had to do was jump off the cliff, turn left, and make my way through some heavy woods. Finally, I would come to the ocean, where I would turn right and follow the beach until I saw the chapel. I learned I had to start early to get to class, because my journey in was a little lengthy.

But it is wild, isn’t it? In our class, we would show up as our chosen avatars and have a live discussion in our own voices, and we would type and talk simultaneously about topics that our professor proscribed. Sometimes I’d sit back and think, “This is unreal!” Which it really was. Both unreal and real.

That sense of “Can this really be happening?” is the feeling we bring to this new way of being church. It won’t innately make sense to us. It will feel like we are traveling on ground that we’ve never traveled before. We will scratch our heads in confusion and keep going on because, well, we need to finish the race.

What I want you to know about virtual sites like Second Life is that people are gathering and having church services on these sites. When I discussed this at one conference recently, a woman reported that her father, a pastor, had a church service in Second Life, and he stayed closely connected with its members. He even went so far as to travel to their home cities to do weddings and baptisms. His virtual church community had a real-life component that was an extension of his online ministry. She was animated as she described this community that began as virtual and somehow became community.

I am wondering what other venues in the virtual world are out there for us to explore? Where will we find people lurking to see if we are as real as our website portrays? Are we willing to learn a new social media language in order to become a new thing in this day?

Excerpt #6

**Crowdsourcing the Message**

Sometimes we get stuck because we are uncomfortable with the form of church. But we can recall that 500 years ago, the Reformation was born when one priest posted his complaints about the church on a door, and a movement took off because the printing press helped him spread those ideas to his world. Today Rev. Martin Luther would be posting on Facebook and advertising on Yelp, with a few in-depth articles shared on Twitter. We need not be afraid, because we have been here before. It is only the format we are afraid of, not the message.

The message is the same. God loves us. God wants us to love God and love each other as we love ourselves. The message is that God, in Jesus Christ, has given us hope that we can face the evils and traumas of our day. That hope has not changed. We need to work on some critiques that our world has given us: critiques about whether or not we are really living out the central message of our faith. We all need to work on that. I believe we can become genuinely Christ-like in our congregations and in the ways we stretch out to the world’s locations of church.

It is important because today we see too many school shootings and bombings in our cities, and terror and war and hunger are part of the fabric of our lives. We don’t have time to squabble about the *form* of the church when we just really need to *be* the church. The world needs us to stand up and *be* the church again in whatever form God calls us to.

If crowdsourcing is about gathering people together, then God is the original crowdSourcer. God called for people to procreate and to care for each other. God organized humanity in families and tribes and kinsfolk. And we began to form ourselves in towns and cities and regions and nations. God is the original Source for the crowd, and today, more than ever, the Crowd is once again seeking communion with the Source. When we feel lonely and misunderstood, we can turn to God for community and connection. When we have made a wrong turn, God directs us back. When we don’t know the way forward, God beckons us to that new direction. Crowdsourcing is nothing new when you think of it. What is new is our understanding of the new form of crowdsourcing.

Crowdsourcing our spirituality, our faith, our connection to the God of Love is what will help us get the message out faster so that the next Reformation can begin. It’s already happening. The question is, Will you join in?

Excerpt #7

In Indiana, the ABCD initiative began with a long process of listening and building relationships. The pastor hired someone whose job it was to walk the neighborhood around the church and listen to people’s stories: “Harges began connecting people with common interests. Within four blocks of the church—the same area where young people had been dying years before—Harges found 45 backyard gardeners. He brought them together around a meal. With no agenda. The gardeners liked it enough that they began to meet monthly. None of them individually had seen their green thumbs as a gift. Together, they began to realize that they had something valuable. In a neighborhood that’s part of an urban food desert, they’ve begun planning their own farmer’s market.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

I believe that ABCD is one of the most important concepts that churches can utilize to make God’s kingdom more and more present here on earth. We spend a lot of time programming and attracting but little time listening to our neighbors. We have the opportunity to empower people to use their God-given gifts to build neighborhood networks where everyone can help one another. This was not a concept foreign to those in the early church. The book of Acts tells us that the church, despite uncertainty and persecution, maintained a bond through communal sharing: “Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (Acts 2:43-47 NRSV).

ABCD, however, doesn’t have to be adopted in a literal form like Broadway UMC. We can adopt ABCD principles in how we organize our congregations. If you think about it, church committees are formed on ABCD principles, filling them with people who have gifts and skills we believe fit. Yet we’ve institutionalized those committees, and they often become more about gatekeeping, hoop jumping, protecting tradition, and controlling power. What if we truly focused on the gifts that people offer and gave them authentic opportunities to let those gifts shine through?

What about ABCD’s role in how we learn and grow as leaders? We’ve become so obsessed with experts. We tell ourselves that we can’t create change because we need an expert to come in and tell us how to do better worship, hire better staff, and create more effective programs. But we can’t always afford experts or we know that too often they’ll just be a waste of time and money because no one will listen to their expertise. Mostly we just want the expert because we’re tired, we don’t know what else to do, and we’re desperate for answers. I know these things because I’ve been there before. If we took ABCD seriously, though, we could reclaim the notion that we’re surrounded by experts: church members, neighbors, friends, family, colleagues, and their connections.

Excerpt #8

Part of my job as a pastor is to sit in denominational meetings, attend conferences, and read blogs and books about how to save our preferred model of church. In those spaces, church leaders talk as though folks are just waiting outside the door waiting for us to figure out a solution so they can come to our churches in overwhelming waves. The funny thing, however, is that while we’ve been debating and trying to just “work harder” a lot of folks seem to be doing fine without us. There’s definitely some folks who are holding out hope, but for the most part people have found their happiness and spiritual connection elsewhere.

It’s time for the church to give up—not on Jesus, but on holding tightly to something that is no longer central to our mission. In the introduction of *Rise of the Creative Class*, Richard Florida offers a hypothetical anecdote where a man travels from the 1950s United States to the present day. He shares that while things may look different he’d still be familiar with cars, mass transit, refrigerators, and airplanes. However, he’d be perplexed by workplaces where white men in suits have been replaced with creative, diverse workers wearing jeans and open-collared shirts. In Florida’s words, “The younger ones might sport bizarre piercings and tattoos. Women and even nonwhites would be managers. Individuality and self-expression would be valued over conformity to organizational norms—and yet these people would seem strangely puritanical to this time-traveler. His ethnic jokes would fall embarrassingly flat. His smoking would get him banished to the parking lot, and his two-martini lunches would raise genuine concern. Attitudes and expressions he had never thought about would cause repeated offense. He would continually suffer the painful feeling of not knowing how to behave.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

If we extended this anecdote to the modern-day mainline church, however, the man would probably be very comfortable with what he found. The same church he attended in the 1950s would probably be standing, the physical buildings and property largely unchanged. The order of worship would be similar, and a similar program, education, and committee structure would still be in place. Although there would be fewer of them, many people in the pews would still be the same, just older. What are the implications for the church then if we take this thought experiment seriously? What are the implications that a time traveler from sixty years ago would find a radically changed society but a church largely untouched? I think this is concerning, but I don’t think it means we need to shut the sanctuary doors and sell off the property. It means rethinking how we organize people and deploy resources for the building of God’s kingdom. It means letting go of our anxiety over money and attendance, because we’ve turned those things into the object of our worship and we’ve been fed lies that it’s those things that will save us from whatever it is we think we need saving from.

1. United Methodist Hymnal (get page) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *United Methodist Hymnal*, page. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Steven Pressfield, *The War of Art: Break Through the Blocks and Win Your Inner Creative Battles* (New York: Black Irish Entertainment, LLC, 2002), p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ibid, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Preaching as Story.” George Fox Evangelical Seminary. <http://www.georgefox.edu/seminary/programs/dmin/preaching-as-story/index.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “Second Life.” <http://secondlife.com/my/whatnext/basics/index.php?lang=en-US>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Kathryn Schulz, *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010) p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. ibid., p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Chip Heath & Dan Heath, *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010), p. 259. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://www.faithandleadership.com/death-and-resurrection-urban-church> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class—Revisited: Revised and Expanded* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), Kindle Locations 418–422. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)