

CHAPTER 36

MOVING WITH THE WIND

One day the wind was blowing strong. Six of us were on a sailboat headed towards the rocks of the Maine coast at exhilarating speed. We were confident in our ability to steer the boat and have it ‘come about,’ to turn away from the shore and begin the next leg of the journey we were on. As we approached the rocks, about to make this move that would take us back out to sea, there was a loud ripping sound. The jenny, the large sail on the front of our boat, tore raggedly in two. This turn was not going to happen as we had planned.

Our skipper headed the boat directly into the wind so that the wind was no longer pushing us as hard towards the rocks. The most agile among us clambered over the rigging and took down the shreds of the old sail and rigged a new one.

We can train and practice and hone our skills. We can memorize our most central texts, be they the Bible or the sailing manual. But then there is the moment when the sail rips to shreds. The moment when everything we thought would happen and all our apparent control fails. The moment when all we can do is point the boat directly into the wind, the point where motion stops. In that moment of stillness, we can begin removing the tatters of our expectations and put up the new sail that can once again catch the winds.

The Spiritual North Star

My journey is headed towards the spiritual North Star. At least, that is my intent. This small boat that I call my body has few defenses against the power of the waves, and the power of my muscles and my will are readily overwhelmed by the force of an active storm or even the intensity of day-to-day winds. Much of the time, I do not have the option of powering straight

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ahead to follow that star unless the wind is with me and the currents aren't too strong.

This image I can feel in my bones from having sailed in the Pacific Northwest among the Gulf Islands, in Desolation Sound, off the coast of Alaska, and in the open ocean. In such territory, there are many narrow places where the wind and current are against you, more than the capacity of the boat to overcome. The only option is to wait for the winds to change or the tide to turn. On other days, it is still and beautiful, but no air is moving to fill the sails. Without a mechanical motor, one can only remain at dock or drift on the currents.

When facing a strong headwind, it is no use to curse it and try to go directly to your destination. You will only be blown backwards, perhaps onto the rocks. This is most evident in the small boats I am familiar with, but even the largest of our human freighters can find themselves caught on a reef or aground in the muck—which is a helpful metaphor for the way humans too often want to engage those they disagree with. We have such an impulse to attack, to contradict, to let others know we have the right answer. We try to bully our way into the headwind and then find the pushback harsh. We can make no headway.

The word for wind—*ruah* in Hebrew—is also how the ancients named the Spirit. This same word designates the breath of the Divine and human breath. It speaks of the invisible moving air that can destroy or transport. It is the central force of life. It is an external force that moves us and cannot be held or controlled by mortal hands. This word offers a profound link between Spirit, the breath of life, and the wind that constantly circles our planet.

The mystery that is God, the incomprehensible power of the tornado, the breath of life, the spirit that enlivens and nourishes our soul—how do we learn to sail such seas, move in the midst of such dynamics? We may steer with confidence amid the rocks that can

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penetrate the hull of our ship, thinking we know how to avoid them all. Then the sail disintegrates in the wind.

When we have attended to the Spirit over the years and learned something of the nature of that divine breath, we can settle back into the stillness with the prow pointed directly into the wind—towards the Infinite—and discover the way forward. If we panic and flail and get caught up in our own emotions, we may easily be stuck in crisis. The more we know the ship (our body) and are familiar with the nature of that wind that comes from God, the more we are able to right ourselves and find the course that is ours to follow.

Setting the Sails to Move with the Breath of God

If you align your boat—your heart, if you will—at the correct angle to the headwind and set your sails accordingly, it is possible to sail quickly and freely. Because you are moving at an angle to where you want to be, readjusting the course and resetting the sails is essential if the overall movement is to be in the right direction. In tight places, when the wind is strong and rocks are nearby, the boat may need to come about quite frequently to adjust to the forces we humans do not control. Thus it can be as we engage with one another, not by clashing but by feeling where the wind is shifting and engaging with it, knowing that interplay that brings us all home.

The motion of the Inward Teacher is sometimes faint, so slight it is easily ignored. The motion of the Spirit is sometimes overwhelming and powerful beyond knowing. Learning and relying on this motion of mystery is the way Friends have chosen. In this way, the markers are often invisible to the hardened eye. The voice of the Light is not always heard or believed. Books and charts offer rules and clear direction. Yet unless one puts a hand to the tiller in the face of the

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wind, one cannot recognize when a sharp motion of the tiller will right the boat and when it will spin the craft into the reef.

There may be times when we have done all that is possible and still end up suspended on an uncharted reef or amidst logs floating so low on the surface they can barely be seen. Such are the natural dangers that arise simply from living on this earth. Worse are the human-caused dangers, epitomized by the massive trash vortex in the Pacific Ocean:

The trash vortex is an area the size of Texas in the North Pacific in which an estimated six kilos of plastic for every kilo of natural plankton, along with other slow[ly] degrading garbage, swirls slowly around like a clock, choked with dead fish, marine mammals, and birds who get snared. Some plastics in the gyre will not break down in the lifetimes of the grandchildren of the people who threw them away.¹

At times, the foulness of the world rises up in our faces. This huge eddy of plastics that suffocates any fish and mammals that encounter it makes vivid the horror of human actions. The inhumanity of human behavior includes using much we have no need for and tossing material things thoughtlessly into the world. The outward horror makes visible the consequences of ignoring the spiritual life and seeking only after personal pleasure, ignoring the Inward Teacher that shows a way of being sensitive to the needs of others and of the planet.

The waste symbolized by this vortex is only one of many human actions that make me furious. At times I get so angry that I can't think clearly at all and simply want to lash out at whoever is acting in such a way.

Anger on the open sea is a danger to all on the small floating structure that is keeping us alive and whose sails propel us on our journey. We lose track of where

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the wind is and ignore the gathering, billowing dark clouds. Such inattention can easily result in swamping the boat or someone being washed overboard. This reality does not negate the horror of the trash vortex; it only amplifies the need to take fruitful action.

Attention to the holy demands that we also attend to the health and the safety of the people and the world around us. This is true in multiple dimensions. Jesus was concerned to heal the body and the soul, the heart and the mind. He was regularly questioned by the authorities who sought to discredit him, yet this did not stop him from healing others.

Awareness of the winds of the Spirit tells us much about how we might act in response to our own fury at injustice and evil and how we might do so without causing more harm. Setting the sails with gusto and pressing hard to change what is wrong asks for a balance between our huge energy and the decided calm that lets us read the waves and calculate our course from the stars.

The Vast Openness into Which We Sail

Being out under the night sky in a small boat is one way I experience the infinite. The water and the sky are all there is. Depending on the night, the sky may carry its own brilliance of stars beyond the ability to name. The sea may display a phosphorescent wave trailing in the boat's path. The moon may light up mountains along a barely visible coastline. The absent moon and stars leave a different emptiness. The times when the clouds touch the water make the world infinitely finite yet without boundaries or borders.

This is how it is to be totally centered and grounded in God, to be bound in the unceasing distance of all that gives life and awareness. This is where prophetic ministry begins and where it returns again and again for sustenance and renewal.

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In this image is part of the vision carried by Friends, the qualities of visibility and openness. This is part of our work, which is to make Truth visible in our lives. The city of God is the city on the hill that cannot be hidden, the lighted candle that won't be confined under a basket. The story of the children in Reading, England, is often told, but I never tire of it. When early Friends were meeting in Reading for worship, soldiers came and dragged the adults to prison. Other similar groups of religious dissenters experienced imprisonment and continued to meet, but they did so in secret. Friends, however, continued to announce the time and place of their meetings for worship. After all the adults had been imprisoned, the children continued to worship at the appointed time and place.

This true tale seems right for our time and place and speaks to something that may be slipping away from Friends: the willingness to be visible, to not hide. Speaking to the power of God in the world and in individual lives is a witness that challenges the state, any government that wants to control its populace and intimidates in the name of safety. Safety is important. We all need healing at times, but healing implies returning to wholeness and engaging again with life. We carry the heritage of our spiritual ancestors' willingness to rely on the strength and power of the Infinite to carry us back into society and witness to another way of being that is grounded in beauty, not fear.

Coming into Port

We all need a safe harbor where we can rest, restock our supplies, and make repairs. Such stays may be brief, in which case more frequent stops are helpful, or they may be times of prolonged retreat when major repairs are needed. Knowing where our home port is gives us security. In our home port are people who care for us, a community that knows us and can help us sort through confusion or competing demands. Some of us are called to remain in port to be a quiet

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welcome, to help with repairs and healing. The more such people know the voice of the Inward Teacher, the better they are able to be part of the prophetic community and serve as anchors for those who venture out into the winds.

Leadings, or even callings to prophetic ministry, do not necessarily last forever or even for a person's lifetime. We reach safe harbor, the end of the voyage, or the transition to a new leg of the trip. Attentiveness is needed to know when to lay down such work. The particular work as a whole may be done, or it may be that a given task may be complete. The gift may be withdrawn for some reason. Clear guidance may come that signals release, as it did for John Woolman, who wrote of being released from a task:

My exercise was heavy, and I was deeply bowed in spirit before the Lord. . . . At length, feeling my mind released from the burden which I had been under, I took my leave of them in a good degree of satisfaction.²

In this case, Woolman was referring to his attendance at yearly meeting and the burden he felt to speak about some weighty Friends who were slaveholders. He had private conversations with some of these Friends about their slaves and arranged to meet with all of them after the end of the annual sessions. Woolman then spoke to them all about the concern he carried and why he had brought them together. He reported "a free conference" upon the subject, after which he felt released from the work. His task was only to raise the concern and leave it in the hands of individual Friends to listen to the Inward Guide in their own hearts.

The release from ministry or from a particular task may be sharp and clear, as it was in this instance for Woolman. It may be a niggling sense of completion or the awareness that someone else has taken up the task or that health or other demands of life have made it impossible to continue. At times, a clearness process

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for laying down a ministry may be as valuable to the individual and the group as was the clearness committee that aided the consideration of taking up the call. It should be honored similarly.

Arrival in port releases us from the demands of skippering the vessel that carries us, whether it is a sailboat, a cruise ship, or simply our skin and bones. In the harbor, we find protection from the heavy winds and seas, the opportunity to find fresh food and water, friends old or new to welcome us, dry clothes, and much more. Awareness of the need to enter the harbor to find renewal, or even to complete the journey and sell the boat, is one of the tasks of the everyday prophet.

Queries for Reflection and/or Discussion

1. Do you feel blocked by headwinds, be they your own fears or the objections of others, or do you tend to run before the wind with such exhilaration that you don't notice the wind has shifted and you are in danger?
2. In what ways have you learned to parry the thrust of opposition or resistance, the 'headwinds'? How do you reset your sails in such a way that the resistance strengthens and frees you to do the work you are called to?
3. What tells you when it is time to step aside from work you have been doing and spend time in the harbor restocking supplies, becoming grounded again, and finding renewal? Have you built times of refreshment into the rhythm of your weeks or years, or do you tend to keep pushing until you are exhausted or disillusioned? How might this pattern change?
4. How do you recognize when a leading has ended? What does it feel like to ask yourself that question?