

# *Paradigms Lost*

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Last autumn, as some of you may remember, the church scheduled a services auction as one of its major fund-raising activities. Members of the church were asked to offer services for which other church members might bid. The range of offerings was impressive and imaginative: The use of a summer home at the shore or in the mountains, a variety of gourmet dinners, a vaccination for your pet, a professional family photo, a massage session. The list of offerings went on and on, detailing the rich resources and broad interests and skills of our congregation. I found myself wishing that I had some such special resource or skill to present, but after racking my brain, I finally fell back on my usual offering: I promised to allow the high bidder to determine the topic for a sermon to be preached here in the church some time during the course of the church year. The purchaser and I would go to lunch together, talk about the sermon, and then I would attempt to create from that conversation a sermon which would respond to the issues the bidder wished addressed.

When the dust of the auction had settled, the church had realized over six thousand dollars; we had had an enjoyable evening together, members had purchased all kinds of services from each other; opportunities for new friendships and deeper relationships had emerged; and Art Hausker had purchased the right to determine a sermon topic to be addressed at some point in this church year. (By the way--if you will permit me a brief commercial--should you would be interested in helping to plan next fall's Services Auction, you might speak to me or call the church office.)

Eventually, Art and I managed to find a time when we could have that lunch I owed him and talk together about the sermon he wanted me to deliver. I had done this before, so I arrived at the restaurant with a pencil and a pad of paper. As it turned out, I did not need either one. Art informed me that the title of the sermon would be "Paradigms Lost" and handed me several pages of clippings he had copied, and four single spaced, type-written pages on which he had listed, with appropriate and incisive commentary, eight current issues which were of concern to him. "You can deal with all of these, or some of these, or one of these," he said. I scanned the pages. The topics ranged from Capital Gains Taxes and Supply-Side Economics, to Welfare and Racism, to US Policy toward Cuba and North American Free Trade Agreement, to the Effects of the Space Program and The Role of Teachers and Teachers Unions in the Public Schools.

I drew a deep breath. My first thought was that since he had obviously thought deeply about these topics and had done a great deal of work, perhaps I should suggest that he do the sermon. But I realized immediately that this was not the deal. And so I took the

papers and promised that I would go to work on the topic. I spent weeks trying to find a way to do justice to the vastness of Art's concerns, to find some way to grab firm hold of one of the legs of this squirming intellectual centipede. I had begun to despair. I considered calling Art, telling him that he had stumped me, and offering him his money back. But then, that would be setting a bad precedent for future Services Auctions.

One morning, while I was out walking, it suddenly occurred to me that by focusing on the eight issues separately or together, I had become so mesmerized by the trees, I had failed to see the forest. It occurred to me that perhaps the clue to understanding how these concerns relate to each other is in the over-arching title which Art had given me: "Paradigms Lost." I went home and I dug out my old Funk and Wagnalls Dictionary. There I read that a paradigm is "an ordered list or table of all the inflected forms of a word or a class of words" Well, that wasn't going to help very much. I read further and found a second definition which described a paradigm as "any pattern or example." That sounded more like what people mean when they talk about a commanding paradigm, or, in times of confusion and change, what is implied by the notion of a paradigm shift or loss.

Most of our lives we live and move and have our beings in the context of over-riding paradigms, of patterns which are so much a part of our environing reality that we usually are not even aware of them. They provide the over-arching intellectual structures which allow us to make sense of the world in which we live and to find meaning in the experiences of our lives. Sometimes these paradigms have a religious quality to them, but ultimately they are deeper than any given religion and constitute the substratum in which religion is embedded and out of which it emerges. They provide the shape and structure for our cultural and communal existence. They are the spiritual ocean in which we swim.

In the middle of this century, in a book dealing with the Structure of Scientific Revolutions, Thomas Kuhn, introduced the concept of paradigm shifts in the hard sciences, extraordinary moments when old, long established patterns of thought and conviction begin to break down and collapse under the weight of their own unexamined assumptions and accumulating complexity. It is then, suggested Kuhn, that fundamental changes may occur in the way we view the world, in the way we understand its functioning, in the way we understand what is possible. It is then that new scientific formulations emerge, new potentials are embraced and new questions are asked.

Social scientists were quick to see in Kuhn's thinking powerful implications for understanding the process by which societies change and grow. Most of the time we live within the patterns created and sustained by unexamined assumptions. We know what the world is and how we fit into that world. One such paradigm is the western religious assumption of a God who created the universe, who has a plan for it and for every part of it, and who, in some mysterious way guides our lives and validates our choices. Everything, from disaster to triumph can be understood as an expression of a divine plan. Every conflict can be viewed as an ethical and moral dilemma in which we struggle to advance the divine purpose. Our lives are lent meaning and purpose because they are integral parts of a vast, divine drama. Living in terms of such a powerful paradigm helps

us make sense of our existence, provides us with ethical and cultural norms, justifies our suffering and pain and disappointment. All that comes to pass is part of a larger purpose and everything will be set right at the end.

But there come moments when even the most powerful of paradigms begins to collapse. There come moments when the pattern by which life is made comprehensible is no longer able to encompass the accumulating cognitive dissonance, when the old way of looking at the world suddenly strains credence to the breaking point. And then the paradigm, the prevailing pattern gives way, and we find ourselves with no over-arching structure by which we may embrace and understand the world in which we find ourselves. And then, it is as if someone had kicked over our ant-hill. We run in a thousand different directions, trying to find some new pattern for understanding a life which has lost coherence. Some attempt to reestablish the old pattern and hold it together in spite of all the evidence to the contrary--and that we call fundamentalism. Some cut loose from the past altogether and attempt to cobble together from half understood myths and traditions and fantasies and dreams a new paradigm by which to live our lives--and that we call new-age thought. And some try to live in the moment, buffeted between the powerful forces of hope and despair, building evanescent communities of mutual support wherever possible--and that we call communitarianism. And some seek to reinvest public life with moral values and ethical imperatives--and that has been called the politics of meaning. And most of us participate in all of these efforts to create a new paradigm at one moment or another, at one level or another. And most of us feel harried and uncertain, caught between conflicting values, pulled by opposing poles, dancing on a wire above the abyss, improvising our lives from moment to moment.

This loss of paradigms finds expression in more than our personal lives. It is writ large in our social, political, cultural institutions. There is no longer a consensus about the nature or role of the larger institutions in which our lives are embedded. And in the absence of broader vision and higher loyalties, immediacy and mendacity take over at every level. The driving force becomes the ethics of the "main chance," the morals of opportunism. And everything is placed at the service of the moment and the immediate opportunity. Thus, in those issues which Art presented to me, dealing with economic policy and practice--ranging from capital gains taxes, through supply side economics, through the North American Free Trade Agreement and all the rest--there is little common consensus about what is at stake because there is no over-riding sense of ultimate values which are to be served. We are left, instead, with instrumental values, with means which have been stripped of their ends. Thus, it is quite common to hear corporations defended and their decisions justified on the basis that their only purpose is to make money for their stockholders. We seem not even able to formulate the question, what purpose should accumulated wealth serve? We seem to have lost any sense that it is possible to do well by doing good. Indeed, in a society dominated by the bottom line, where profit is the evidence of morality it sometimes seems impossible to talk seriously about the greater good. And so we get caught up in debates over trickle down and trickle up economics and which scheme will produce greater wealth and cannot formulate the questions, wealth for whom and for what and why?

Living in a society in which the center does not hold, in which over-arching meaning has been supplanted by the ethic of the main chance, we often respond to people who are unable to function in this kind of world with anger, hostility, fear or ridicule. Thus, the vast debate over welfare, which, in the terms of an earlier paradigm might have been carried on as a compassionate discussion about how society best cares for those who, for whatever reason, cannot care for themselves, this debate which might have been about what we have a right to expect from each other as members of society, this debate which might have been about the appropriate claim of citizens in need upon the aggregated wealth of society, has become, instead vindictive and punitive and mean. We do not see the question of welfare in terms of a larger understanding of society; rather we see it in terms of its cost and what is perceived to be a drag on the corporate fisc, and a determination not to be taken advantage of by anyone--deadbeat, widow or orphan. And perhaps behind that anger and vindictiveness and meanness lies a recognition that most of us live only a paycheck or two or three from welfare ourselves, and that in a world in which larger paradigms have been lost, our only guarantee of worth and meaning is that we are not like them.

As another example, a few weeks ago, the members of what is called "The Heaven's Gate Cult," quietly and serenely chose to end their lives in the belief that the Hale-Bopp Comet had come as a sign to them that they were now prepared to ascend to a higher level of existence--a hypothetical reality which was infinitely preferable to our immediate reality. Many of us have responded to their action with confusion, and fear, and ridicule. Most of us find it difficult even to read the deeper question which their final corporate act poses: What is it about our current society which would drive otherwise intelligent, apparently sensitive individuals to this kind of drastic act of final separation? The mass suicide in California may be a commentary on the instability of the cult members; it may be evidence of the pervasive power of the cult leader over the minds of others; it certainly poses a deep and abiding question about the social climate in which we find ourselves.

Living in a time of lost paradigms presents a deep and abiding challenge to all of us. Our lives are filled with competing demands and conflicting challenges. We run from moment to moment, from responsibility to responsibility, from obligation to obligation, until there seems to be no time to cultivate our own souls, to think about the meaning and the significance of all our busyness. And yet, no matter how tired we may become, we dare not stop for if we do we may slip, and find ourselves by-passed in the dizzying race to succeed, or at the very least be forced to face the emptiness of all we are doing, forced to admit to ourselves that the emperor has no clothes, that in the end we are spending our lives for that which is not worth the price we are paying. We have allowed ourselves to become victims of a drive for success in a world which has lost its ability to define success. Without an overarching pattern, a deep and embracing paradigm, success can only mean more of the same and the drive for success becomes not a course to be run, but a treadmill which ends finally in exhaustion.

As I have reminded you in the past, A. Powell Davies, one of our former ministers, and the greatest Unitarian preacher of this century, once defined life as "an opportunity to grow a soul." Davies lived in the context of a commanding moral and ethical paradigm,

and his preaching called women and men to meaningful lives in the context of that paradigm. The reality in which we find ourselves here at the end of the twentieth century, on the verge of a new millennium is a very different reality. Our challenge is to grow our souls in the absence of that over-arching pattern which can give meaning to our lives, to find a way to structure integrity into our living without the unchallenged support of larger, stable cultural patterns. It is not a very comfortable way to live and the satisfactions in such a time can be brief and fleeting, albeit very real.

I would suggest that in a time of lost paradigms, while we wait for the new consensus to emerge, the questions we need to ask ourselves over and over again, are these: "Who do I want to be and what must I do to become who I want to be, and is this that I am doing helping me grow my soul?" Those are questions which offer a way to open up many of the challenges and confusions and problems of our existence--on a personal level and on a corporate level. Whether we are talking about how we balance the competing demands on our time and energy, how we stay involved in the lives of our partners, our children, our communities, or how we react to public policy the question I urge you to ask is not the question of cost or efficiency or expediency, but rather the question of who am I in this situation, and who do I want to be, and who will I become as a consequence of how I respond? In a world in which corporate integrity is difficult to define and even more difficult to discover, personal integrity becomes the standard by which we measure our lives and grow our souls. In a world of paradigms lost, we are called to build structures of meaning in our lives, in faith that with time, those worlds of value and hope will merge to generate a new and commanding paradigm by which to structure a larger corporate existence.

I am not at all certain that this is the sermon that Art Hausker thought he had paid for. But I thank him for provoking me to think more deeply of this strange, transitional moment in which we find ourselves, this time when one era is dying and a new era is struggling to birth and the challenge we face to live and grow a soul in such a time as this.