

We're Not in Kansas Anymore – Surfing the Edge of Chaos

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We're Not in Kansas Anymore

Surfing the Edge of Chaos

We started off this morning talking about how the world around us has changed. We talked about how we're not in Kansas anymore. Today we live in this strange new place over the rainbow. It's a little unsettling trying to get used to a whole new set of realities that we didn't grow up with and don't know how to respond to. Sometimes we get scared or nervous because we're not used to talking trees, flying monkeys, and wicked witches. But sometimes God sends us on a mission where we

don't have a clue about how to do it, like bringing back the broomstick of the wicked witch of the west. And when we're having to make a lot of major adjustments in our lives, it can feel like we're surfing on the edge of chaos.

[*Surfing the Edge of Chaos*](#) is the title of a book published about eight years ago. In this book, a number of scientific researchers did a major study of many different life forms. They made some new discoveries about the way living organisms function. Since the church is a living organism, they are actually describing how churches and church systems function. Becoming aware of these realities, helps us understand what is happening in the church today and what kind of actions we need to take, as we learn to surf on the edge of chaos in this brave new world somewhere over the rainbow.

As these scientists studied nature, biology, and living organisms, they discovered four key realities that kept popping up over and over again.

Surfing the Edge of Chaos

■ Equilibrium is the precursor of death.

ONE –

equilibrium is the precursor to death. All of us seek equilibrium in our lives. We seek a sense of balance, a routine, a common way of living life every day,

every week, every month. We are creatures of habit, going to the same stores, driving the same way to work, and socializing with the same friends. We try to balance work and play, healthy food and junk food, the Super Bowl and the opera. We seek this sense of balance, which is often a good thing, but over time our strengths become our weaknesses. Too much of a good thing becomes a bad thing.

If a soldier is never sent into battle, his skills become rusty, her reflexes become just a little bit slower, and the mind not quite as sharp. The researchers who discovered this reality found that when living systems are in a state of equilibrium, they are less responsive to the changes occurring around them. This places them at maximum risk. What this means for us is that if your church hasn't changed anything in the last 30 years, you're in real trouble. If everybody is happy with the status quo, your equilibrium has put you on the verge of death. By not changing or not having to change, you forget how to adapt, how to absorb, and how to adjust, and when the floor drops out from underneath you, you have no clue about what to do.

The problem is that most of us have this incorrect notion that our job is to bring equilibrium to our congregations. It's not. But, when our churches lose their equilibrium, our members look to us church leaders to restore the church to its previous state of equilibrium. We do this so we won't have to deal with the conflict or anger or differences of opinion. We pray for equilibrium. We pray for stability, for control, for nothing to change. And so we become stale, soft, weak, complacent, and content. We are neither hot nor cold, but lukewarm. Many of us pray regularly for equilibrium.

I don't think that's God's will for our lives. I think God wants to shake up our congregations. I think God wants us to experience life, action, feeling, emotion, conflict, hurt, grief, pain, excitement, and enthusiasm. Many of these are things we do not pray for. We do not want them to happen. But, God doesn't want us to die. Yes, we do need some stability in our lives. But, having too much stability for too long is not a good thing. And since too much equilibrium leads to death, I believe God will from time to time remove that equilibrium from our lives. He loves us too much to let us die. God doesn't want us to lose our purpose. God doesn't want us to lose our salt and our light, the edge he has given us. Some churches have had too much equilibrium, and had to close their doors, because it eventually led to their death.

Surfing the Edge of Chaos

- When faced with threat or opportunity, all living organisms are pushed to the edge of chaos.

TWO –

The second reality these researchers discovered was this: when faced with threat or opportunity, every living organism is pushed to the edge of chaos. What they found was that when their

environment was safe, stable, predictable, comfortable, the living organisms tended to stay towards the center. When they were faced with some negative threat or some positive opportunity, then they were pushed to the edge of chaos.

Part of the natural rhythm of life is that forces outside of our control, come along when we least expect it, and push us to the edge of chaos. Sometimes it's a threat. Sometimes it's a wildfire, a tornado, an earthquake, a tsunami, or a drought.

Sometimes it's watching our life savings disappear in the stock market decline, or seeing an adjustable rate mortgage increase two percentage points and not being able to afford the monthly payment. Sometimes it's a disability, an extended illness, a death in the family, losing a job, or a divorce. Sometimes it's a church split, the loss of key lay or pastoral leadership, a major conflict in a congregation or in a denomination that pushes us to the edge of chaos. I used to get mad every year at our national General Assembly meeting. I used to get all angry at the stupid decisions they would make, because it just created all this conflict. Now, I look at it differently, because I see how God is using it to push us to the edge of chaos, and now I can see God at work in the chaos.

Sometimes we are pushed there by really positive opportunities. It may be being offered a job on the other side of the country, getting a full ride college scholarship to a school that's 3000 miles away, getting married, or winning the lottery. It may be a church that receives a \$1 million bequest, a new pastor coming in, or starting an exciting new racial ethnic ministry in the congregation. These are wonderful opportunities that even though we celebrate them, can push us over the rainbow, into territory that we've never been in before, and we find our congregation on the edge of chaos.

Surfing the Edge of Chaos

■ It is there on the edge of chaos that new life forms begin to emerge.

THREE –

The third reality that these researchers discovered is that it is there on the edge of chaos, that new life forms self-organize and begin to emerge. The place of equilibrium is the place of management

and control. The edge of chaos is the place of creativity and new ideas. This is where we are forced to think outside the box. This is the place of invention and innovation. This is where entrepreneurs thrive, where new businesses are started, and where new churches are started. You realize that if you don't figure out how to do this and you don't figure it out fast, you won't survive for very long.

The church in North America today has been pushed to the edge of chaos. We are teetering on the edge, and the jury is still out as to whether we will fall off the cliff or move back onto solid ground. The edge of chaos is both a place of great fear and anxiety, as well as a place of new dreams and visions and missional experiments. So, we need to find the people who know how to flourish on the edge of chaos. Who are these people? Often they are artists, they are poets, they are writers, they are composers and musicians. The people who can help us are the creative types, who unfortunately, have left the church in recent years, because they didn't feel there was a place or an openness for their creative gifts. The people we need are the off-the-wall types, who have a gift for seeing the world differently, and thinking about what might and could be. But when our sessions and committees develop habits and cultures of destroying any new idea that gets expressed, these people tend to leave and find a group of people who will give them a space for their creativity to emerge.

Surfing the Edge of Chaos

- Living systems cannot be directed on a linear path. Unforeseen consequences are inevitable. The challenge is to disturb them in the general direction of the desired outcome.

FOUR –

And finally, the fourth reality these researchers learned is that you cannot direct a living organism toward an intended goal, you can only disturb it in the general direction. In other words, you simply cannot lead a church as if it were a train on a train track. You can't lead a church on a straight line from

Point A to Point B to Point C. That's not the way living organisms move. You can only disturb a church in the general direction, which means the church will move right, then left, then up, then down, then upside down, then right side up, before it finally reaches a specific point.

Leading a church is not like flying an airplane, where you can plot out your course and fly on a fairly straight line. Leading a church is more like sailing a sailboat across a lake. You have to catch the changing winds to harness its energy to move the boat, which means the boat will tack to the starboard then to the port and back and forth numerous times before it crosses the lake. Leading a church is less like herding cattle, where the cowboys on their horses can keep them on a fairly straight line. Leading a church is much more like herding butterflies. Have you ever tried to herd a group of butterflies? They will fly in circles and inside and out, refusing to recognize your very skillful leadership, getting where they want, when they want.

In the comics of the newspaper, I always used to read the Family Circus. And every once in a while, the cartoonist would chart the path that one of the kids would take to go home from school. Instead of walking on a straight line from school to home, the kid would jump this fence, go through this yard, climb a tree, play with this dog, throw a stick, jump a creek, cross a street, swing on a swing set, do a somersault, kick a ball, and do about 30 different things, changing directions 20 different times before reaching home. All this, when he could have just walked home on a straight line. That's what living organisms do. That's what it's like to lead the church. You cannot direct a church in a straight line towards a specific goal, you can only disturb it in the general direction. Leading your people is like herding butterflies.

We see this in the Old Testament story of the Exodus. The nation of Israel had enjoyed 120 years of stability under Kings Saul, David, and Solomon. The nation was split into two kingdoms. The northern kingdom of Israel survived another 200 or so years before they were conquered by the Assyrians. And the southern kingdom of Judah survived an additional 150 or so years of stability and equilibrium, before they were conquered by the Babylonians. Equilibrium leads to death, and that's what they experienced. When they were carried off to Babylon, they were pushed to the edge of chaos. They didn't know how to live in a pagan world that believed in multiple gods and had different values and strange world views and odd beliefs. Many of the people didn't know if they were going to survive.

But, when you are pushed to the edge of chaos, new life forms always emerge. What was the new form of life that emerged in Babylon? It was the synagogue. Before then, synagogues didn't exist. Everybody worshipped in the one temple in Jerusalem. There was only one building where the presence of God resided. But, in Babylon, they began to create smaller, neighborhood gatherings of believers that became synagogues. This was not a top down, hierarchical plan that the religious leaders directed and implemented. The people organized the synagogues themselves from the bottom up, from the ground up. If they had never been pushed to the edge of chaos, the synagogues never would have been created. They only needed the temple when they lived in Kansas, but when they had to adjust to the new world over the rainbow, they needed synagogues.

We see these realities in the New Testament, as well. After Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, most of Jesus' followers stayed in Jerusalem. They did not launch a massive missionary effort to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth. They had a sense of equilibrium in Jerusalem and they were very happy to stay there and live their whole life as Jewish Christians in their homeland. But, this wasn't God's plan, and the people weren't cooperating. So, they were pushed to the edge of chaos. The Roman army came in and tore down the temple around 70 AD, they started persecuting the Christians, and this scattered the believers all around the known world: Northern Africa, Asia, Greece, Italy, and so on.

This forced the Christians to interact with Greeks and Romans and Africans and lots of people who didn't believe as they did. New life forms began to emerge as house churches started to spring up, and people like the Apostle Paul would go around and train elders in each city to preach and teach and lead the people as they moved into these neighborhoods and tried to figure out what God was up to in these strange new places. It wasn't a decision that was made in the headquarters in Jerusalem. It wasn't a plan that could be directed. It was a movement that could only be disturbed in a general direction.

There were times when it used to simpler to be the church. When you are a fourth generation church in Kansas, and you know what it's like living on the prairie, it may not be easy, but it's predictable, and you know what you need to do every year. But, when a tornado comes along, and plops your church down in an entirely new environment over the rainbow, you are completely out of your element. You start surfing the edge of chaos, learning as you go, with just in time learning. The skills and capacities that served the church so well in Kansas for generations, don't even apply in the world over the rainbow. We have to learn a completely new skill set, because this world is just not the same.

When the church existed in Kansas, pastors only had to do three things: preach/teach, administer the sacraments, and visit the people in their homes. For the church in the over the rainbow world we live in today, pastors are expected to do about 20 different things, and each church member has a different list of 20 things.

The same can be said of elders, deacons, and other church leaders. Everybody is being asked to do more, and to learn a different set of skills, not because what the church did before was bad, but because the world around us has changed.

And while it's hard and uncomfortable and frustrating, we CAN learn to do this. Our mantra as Presbyterians is that we are the church reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God. We believe old dogs can learn new tricks. We believe we are lifelong learners. We don't believe God is finished with us yet. We believe the Holy Spirit can and is in the process of changing us. But, what makes us nervous is the way that God teaches us all of these new things we need to learn, is by pushing us to the edge of chaos. And the only way we will go there, and the only way we will learn anything new there, is if we go together. We need a fellowship of believers around us for moral support. We need the faith and confidence of other Christians for when ours is weak. We need the wisdom of the presbytery when our knowledge seems to have run out.

The role of the presbytery is to bring people and churches together to learn from each other about how to live on the edge of chaos, how to grow and thrive through it without killing each other, and how to let the new life emerge without stomping it out.

We can re-ignite our missional imagination.

We can cultivate new soil for the planting of new seeds.

And we can launch new missional experiments that will lead our churches into a vibrant new season of ministry.

We're not in Kansas anymore.

We're in a New Era of Mission.

And We Are Surfing on the Edge of Chaos.

If we all work together, we can learn to catch and enjoy the next set of waves that are already heading our way.

