

Saying Yes  
April 27, 2008 (New Member Sunday)  
Ellsworth, Maine

There is a cliff in Matheran, a hill station outside of Mumbai, in India. At the edge you can look straight down, not even a railing between earth and sky. Some people stay back; some walk right up until the staining red clay crumbles beneath their sandals. All they see are tops of trees and clouds sunk low in the valley and dust under their toes. About half of the people on any given day look like they're going to vomit; the other half look like they are about to fly. They are twins, the seduction and the fear, the gift and the crisis of height.

In physics, height is stored energy, a wealth of something coming. In combination with gravity and mass, height offers the possibility of doing something.

Just by location, just by being where it is, a thing can have potential. It doesn't need to be moving, it doesn't need to be strong, it doesn't even need to be heavy (although it helps). The trick is that in order to release the potential, the object must fall. It must give up its location, give up its possibility, and commit to a swan dive into whatever lies beneath it.

For mountain climbers such a dive could be fatal. For an eagle fledgling, it's the beginning of freedom. For churches...it all depends on the particular leap of faith.

There are some things we know:

if we do nothing, we will die and with us will go our potential.

if we leap, we may die—or we may not.

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It's vacation season. In much of this country *vacation* means sand and beach balls and swim suits and so forth. In many other places *vacation* means tents and wool socks and insect repellent and flashlights. In most cases it means a lot of stuff. In many cases the stuff goes in the car.

Packing the car is always a delicate task, a fine art of balance and spatial relations. And in my world it is always delegated to one person, with one vision. The fact is, more than one person just makes the job too long, too complicated, and no better than if one person manages it. Even two talented people are generally no better than one, and any untalented people involved in the process makes it four times longer. The goal is, of course, to have enough room in the back seat for the smallest passengers while keeping all the stuff clean and dry and all the road food accessible.

I've noticed these cars arriving here already. Everyone knows what they look like, with no rear visibility and dirty sneakers shoved up against one back window.

And every single time the car stops stuff comes out, gets rearranged, and has to be put back. By the same person. With the same vision.

It's a kind of delegation we all should be familiar with, but somehow in church we choose other methods a lot—methods that involve three or four voices and double or triple the packing time. I don't think it's because we are afraid of the journey, although that may play a role. I think it's because we are trapped in Gil Rendle's version of management.

Gil Rendle is a consultant for the Alban Institute, an organization that does a lot of church advising and evaluation. In their 34 year history, they have done an incredible number of surveys and studies with congregations to try and figure out why and how we do what we do, what works, and what doesn't. In his keynotes at UU University last year he spoke about the difference he sees between management and leadership. He suggests that we often ask for

leadership. We want to be shown new ways to do things; we want to find structures that support our dreams; we want to become the church we all know we can be. On a smaller scale, that's what brings us to church in the first place—we want to be the people we know we can be, and we suppose the church can help us work on that. As churches we say we want similar things, and we ask our leaders to lead us into those processes.

Then we get into the process. We discover that the process is not what we expected. We discover that our friends are uncomfortable with the new structures; we discover that *we* are uncomfortable with the new structures. We discover that there are people leaving; we discover that there are people arriving. We discover, in short, that the process is going to change the church, and that if we stay it will change us. That makes us uneasy.

So we go into what Rendle calls management mode. We start trying to make sure that we are doing things right, and we define right by “comforting and easy”. So we look for ways to soothe the people who are upset and stop the boat from rocking. We look for management—to keep us doing things right—instead of leadership: guidance about doing right things. Leadership helps the crew get moving; management gets it anchored.

An anchored boat is really hard to move.

And while it may keep us from sinking, a boat is a vessel, meant to get somewhere.

This is not to say that this model of management has no place. Without some measure of comfort and stability no institution can survive. There are times that the crew needs to sleep; there are storms that need to be waited out in relative safety. But there must be a balance, a rhythm, a swing between stillness and transformation. We need the anchor, but we also need the travel. We need the outreach. We need the possibility. We need the potential released...even if it means freefall into the unknown.

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Greg Mortenson is a mountain climber. On his way down K2 he took a wrong turn, ended up in the wrong Pakistani village, and launched a career. Now he does very different but equally extraordinary work. In [Three Cups of Tea](#) he describes his journey from impulsive promise to one-man peace ambassador, building schools all over the remote corners of Pakistan.

One village at a time, he's giving them schools—infrastructure that makes cultural transformation possible.

--and he's doing it alone.

Just reading his website is exhausting. The donations page boils down to this: thanks for visiting. If you want to give money, great. But Mortenson works alone, so don't bother offering time, energy, or supplies. The balance is delicate, and we can't afford any mistakes.

Some people are made for that kind of life, and we need them out there, making things happen by sheer force of will and charisma. It's efficient. it's fast. And it's effective. But it's a tough structure to get our heads around in this country of the people by the people for the people. What if they are the wrong people or the wrong decisions?

I hold that it rarely matters.

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Many years ago I felt differently. I agonized over everything. The color of notebook for a particular class could tie me up for days; the menu choices at a restaurant were paralyzing. No matter what I did I was afraid that I was doing it wrong, and I was so afraid that I often did nothing instead.

Then one day I had an epiphany. I was spending the day with an equally indecisive friend, and we spent the entire day trying figure out how we should spend our time. Something finally

snapped and one of us pulled out a quarter, assigned one choice to each side, and flipped. We did that thing and it was fine. It was definitely better than the first several hours that we spent figuring out what to do. So now I say that there are five important decisions you will make in your life, and there is no way of really knowing what those are. Everything else can be effectively and adequately decided by a coin toss.

Most of us don't choose most things that way. We choose based on past experience or future hope; we choose based on advice from friends or instinct or life circumstance. So when we turn a decision over to someone else, they will probably choose just fine. And in five years *that* will be the way it always has been. We can live in the past, or in a world of unchosen roads—or we can live in the present and the future, with the way things are and the way they might next be. If we choose to live forward, and we choose to live in trust, then we can share the weight of leadership much more easily.

For example: the board has been making decisions about how to resolve the leaks in the roof. There's a good chance most of you care passionately about fixing the leaks. There's an equally good chance that almost none of you have a specific opinion about the fasteners used to secure whatever new roofing is put in place. They should work. They should last. If they do that, it's unlikely that any of you want a congregational meeting about roof fasteners.

Mortenson is effective because he works alone. He is inspiring because he is effective. He does good work.

Imagine what he could do here—what if he showed up and offered to run an outreach project building churches for congregations in India?

We'd probably start with a committee. Then there would be a congregational meeting to decide which town should get the first church. He would be bound by the vote of the congregation, naturally. And then we'd have a long fundraising drive, because we couldn't let him start until he had enough money for the whole project. If there were private donors with deep pockets we would only accept their money if they promised not to want special recognition. He would be compelled to adhere to LEED green building standards and there would be a second committee to oversee the architectural design.

I imagine he'd be disgusted and gone within six months.

What keeps him going—what keeps most people inspired and engaged in volunteer work—is *results*. Good results. Big results. Work without results has high burnout and high turnover. Habitat for Humanity is a popular volunteer project with lots of repeaters because at the end you have a house. If you're a crafter or an artist of any kind you know that moment when it's done, when you step back and it is no longer a part of you, no longer attached by an umbilical cord but a thing on its own terms, a poem or painting or sweater or table complete. It's project-ness has been left behind and replaced by an independent existence that may or may not include you.

There is such pride in that, and such relief and such joy. It is done.

When we all participate in every decision we deny our volunteers that satisfaction because the results are so hard to come by. They work hard only to have their work refigured by an uninformed group that ostensibly delegated the work to them in the first place. It is disheartening. It is unkind. It is mistrustful. It is undisciplined. Sometimes we all need to have our say...but often we don't.

And there is spiritual learning here. There is spiritual discipline in being a follower—a good follower, a faithful and dedicated follower. We choose our leaders carefully and then in most cases it is appropriate to follow them. Not the same person all the time, and not without careful thought, but well-executed, following is a path to spiritual growth. It's also a path to relaxation.

We spend an awful lot of our lives in stress about things we can't or don't need to control. It's okay to let it go. That's part of being in a group. Even the wild geese take turns in the lead, and when they follow, they just flap along behind.

This following thing is a hard lesson for UU's, born out of New England's town meetings. We are accustomed to a system in which everyone always has a say. Like all humans we are afraid of being invisible. Being heard by the group helps us know we exist.

But we are also practical stock. We pride ourselves on doing what makes sense, and sometimes it makes sense to let our being be confirmed by faith and let a small, dedicated group—or individual—make a decision. Sometimes the power lies in ceding our right to speak, that the group's will might become action, and in so acting we might all live our faith.

Often we are more effective together. Often we are more true to ourselves together. This is why we join with each other, why we trust each other, why we commit, why we covenant. This is why we are a congregation of questioning, questing believers and not just congregations of one. When we welcome new people into our midst, we do so understanding that every one of us is a prophet and that outside eyes are not clouded with the dust from our floors. We do so understanding that we are touched by every life and every face who comes to us, and that we will touch each other. And we do so knowing that who we are is the result of our continuing commitment to the questions, to the processes, and to the answers, rising again and again from our hearts. May we guide each other into an ever renewing future.

Blessed be  
and amen.