

Exodus 32:25-33 and Luke 6:20-28

Last week I shared Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg's take on the story of the Golden Calf, how, when Moses went up on Mt. Sinai, Aaron and the other traumatized Hebrew ex-slaves dealt with their anxiety by constructing a technical fix: they created a familiar, physical representation of a deity, so that they wouldn't feel abandoned and lost in the wilderness while Moses was away. Rabbi Ruttenberg suggests that what they actually needed was an *adaptive* solution—that they were faced with something qualitatively new that could not be addressed with familiar tools. And she suggested further that we are in a similar situation, in which old patterns of leadership are simply not up to the challenge, and we need creative new leadership, such as Black Lives Matter.

Today I want to pick up where she left off, with some ideas of my own. First, just as an example of the paradigm change that can happen, a story about how the pandemic has affected architecture appeared in the *Washington Post* on July 13. It points out how the industry was hard-hit by the pandemic, with 8 out of 10 firms applying for the paycheck protection money.

Suddenly, the profession was at a crossroads. Was this a time for quick, targeted, pragmatic responses to a built environment that no longer felt safe, or was this a revolutionary moment, a call to rethink everything?ⁱ

E.g., was this a time for a technical fix or an adaptive fix?

A Boston architect, Michael Murphy, explicitly says, "I don't want to throw a technical solution at this [pandemic]." His comment is interesting, given the particular attention and practical expertise he and his firm have devoted to the health-care industry. Murphy's group was instrumental in designing the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery,

Ala., which memorializes African Americans killed by lynching. . . . But it is Murphy's earlier work, on health-care facilities in Africa, that has established his reputation as an essential voice in the field.

He designed the Butaro District Hospital in Rwanda in 2011 to use sustainable and mostly low-tech means--natural ventilation, high ceilings, external corridors and low-speed fans--to minimize the transmission of airborne diseases. Its natural stone walls and red roofs are fitted into a hilly landscape. Its bright, open interiors seem to gather and hold light. But the building also promoted healing at a deeper level by using local labor for construction, local building materials and techniques, making it a collective project and an economic engine in a country that is still suffering from the trauma of the 1994 genocide.

The article goes on to quote other architects saying that we should do more to address the pandemic than just creating touchless elevator buttons and antimicrobial surfaces. The crisis of the pandemic is related to the crisis of climate change and to the economic crisis. So architects need to think about buildings not as machines or as disposable consumer items, but as organisms. Michael Murphy says "I've come to believe that breathing and the access to clean air is a fundamental issue. Breathing is an architectural and spatial problem."

It is about things as basic as materials that inflame asthma, or neighborhoods encased within highways that befoul the air. But it's also about access to open space, buildings with functioning windows and domestic spaces that breathe.

What I want to highlight is the way the architects in this story explicitly reject tinkering around the edges, and want to talk about design a whole new way. They're not upgrading elevators; they're switching out the operative metaphor for buildings.

On Palm Sunday, April 5, Tom and I took a walk after church with a friend. We were curious about all the police cars along Beaver Ave., and when an officer asked us to walk on the other side of the street, I asked him what had happened. He said there'd been a traffic accident. That afternoon we learned that a man in a pickup truck had intentionally run down a woman walking her dog and killed both her and the dog. He had fled, but the police had intercepted him a few blocks away and arrested him.

This man, Jason Sassman, has such a long police record that it doesn't fit on one screen; you have to scroll to see it all. His first offense is recorded in 2001, when he was 31 years old. He looks ancient now, though he's only in his early 50s. On the day that he ran over Lauren Rice and killed her, he was on meth. He did not know her, but as he drove down Beaver and caught sight of her, it came to him that she was going to kill someone, so he directed his truck toward the sidewalk and hit her and the dog.

Clearly this man has been in trouble for a long, long time. I would guess that some kind of distress preceded his meth use—perhaps mental illness. We all know how difficult it is to get any kind of mental health treatment, and how many dead ends you run into along the way. It's worse for a poor person, obviously. And the inaccessibility of mental health treatment makes it far less likely that men will pursue it for themselves, because they tend to be predisposed to be resistant to that kind of help.

However, right after Lauren Rice was struck and killed, the Des Moines police were on the scene promptly, in force, doing their job of stopping the perpetrator and gathering evidence of what had happened. We do know how to get police on the scene. The problem is, the crime had already happened. *Prevention* of that crime would have required a far more

robust system of mental health infrastructure, as well as other components of a social safety net that address issues of poverty. But you can't cost out crimes that never happen because they were prevented, so we invest heavily in punitive police forces, where we can see our money spent on arrests and evidence-gathering. We have disinvested in all the things that would diminish the need for such services.

When I hear "Defund the police," that's what I think of. The slogan means different things to different people, but to me it means that police shouldn't be our solution to every problem—that some of the money we put into policing should go to mental health and housing and public education and a safety net that will prevent the kind of tragedy that was the death of Lauren Rice. Tinkering around the edges by requiring police training on mental health or racial bias is just a technical fix. We need adaptive changes that come from a changed perspective—a perspective from the bottom, the powerless and vulnerable of whom Jesus spoke. And truly, conceiving of our society and our responsibilities from the perspective of the poor and those who mourn would be a real paradigm change from the authoritarian model we've been operating under for decades. But why is business the paradigm for everything? Schools should be run like a business, the government should be run like a business—the assumption is that profit (or, more modestly, solvency) is the highest value. If the kingdom of God is given to the least of these, perhaps schools and government should be run like a family, in which everybody counts and people get what they need in order to thrive. I would suggest that "Defund the police" is an invitation to adaptive change, a model of society that is envisioned from the bottom rather than from the top.

In the Exodus story, God required a hideous penalty of the people who had created the

golden calf, the family of Aaron. Each Levite had to go from one gate of the camp to the other and back, and on his way kill every man he met, whether brother, friend, or neighbor. It's beyond horrible, and I'm not even sure what it means, but it's clear that the family of Aaron had to atone for the transgression that had been a technical fix to an adaptive problem. I would suggest that our situation is no less serious. We need to think big, not cautious and incremental. We need to take Jesus seriously when he says to prioritize the most vulnerable. We need to speak up in the public conversation (like Kristi and Steve, who both were quoted in the newspaper article about the Indianola mascot).

One young architect quoted in the *Washington Times* article alludes to the necessity for humility going forward. Architecture can't be heady and conceptual; it needs to be informed by things like observation, listening, collaboration and practical insight. And the cool thing about architects is that they combine art with practical function, which means that the more they listen and pay attention to what has been ignored, the better they will design. "A virus is giving our planet a remedial lesson about how we are all connected, and architecture may be the science that consolidates this terrible but liberating new wisdom."

Let us pray: God, above us, beyond us, and embodied among us—we pray for the imagination and courage required for this time. May we not be prisoners of the water in which we swim, but playful adventurers who perceive the edges of our pool, say "What if" and listen for a response. You know how overwhelming that is, and how vastly outnumbered we are in this fearful, punitive society. So encourage us, too, dear God, and help us to maintain the courage of our convictions as we try to enact our faith in you, whom Jesus trusted unto death. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2020/07/13/pandemic-has-shown-us-what-future-architecture-could-be/?arc404=true>