

Pow! Moment
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I have been holed up reading on study leave this past week. Part of the reason I needed that time was because I tend to read with great deliberation. It is inevitable that anything which I enjoy reading will bear evidence of my getting through it. I underline passages, highlight paragraphs, write all sorts of things in the margins, and *even*—much to Carol’s horror—bend down the corners of pages as I go. Sometimes I fold the pages right down the middle, too.

When the reading goes well, there can be all sorts of little moments of insight along the way. When Carol and I shared books in Seminary we marked those moments in particular ways. If we felt a passage was central to a certain argument we would write “key” in the outside margin. That was Carol’s habit first, so to differentiate between her key moments and my own, I began *drawing* a key shape in the margins. I took to marking the text up in other ways, too. When I was surprised or amazed by something in the text I took to writing POW in the margins in capital letters. If it was really striking, an exclamation mark would follow. If it really challenged me or changed my views, I would make energy lines around it like it was a sound effect in an old superhero comic, or the Batman TV show: >POW!<

On occasion, we get those really big >POW!< moments in the texts of our lives, too. There are those moments when life hits you over the head with something so intensely that you come to a new and deep understanding about something all at once. All at once, you step into a new view of things... All at once, something suddenly and powerfully clarifies and changes everything.

A pow moment might happen around something which is not much fun. Like the sudden clarity on the eve of your tenth birthday that big changes were coming in your life, and sooner than you might like. Greater expectations and responsibilities were waiting on the other side of that milestone birthday cake and pile of presents. As poet Billy Collins puts it in his poem *On Turning Ten*:

This is the beginning of sadness, I say to myself,
As I walk through the universe in my sneakers.
It is time to say goodbye to my imaginary friends,
Time to turn *the first big number*.¹

¹ Quoted from page 116 of *The Heart of Christianity*, by Marcus Borg, ©2003 (Harper Collins One, New York). Italics mine.

Another pow moment might be the earth-shaking realization that we are scolding our own child using the exact same tone and phrase that our parents used on us. And all at once we realize that *our parents were right*, and now it is our turn to be in their role, just as surely as our child is filling the one we used to inhabit. That's a mind bender, no?!

Pow moments are often accompanied by an overwhelming sense of wonder. Like when we climb a mountain for the first time and we can all but see holy fingerprints in the curves of the landscape and the deep beauty of how everything fits together just so. Or when a child joins our family, and we suddenly *know*—not imagine, or hope, or suppose, but *know* with every fiber of our being—that we are one link in a chain of creation which stretches back infinitely into the past, and on and on before us into an endless future.

But there is more to pow moments than gaining new perspectives or passing flashes of wonder. In fact, there is a real danger that pow moments will *provide only wonder* if we are not careful. We need to reflect deeply on those moments to really drink in and embody their full meaning. We need to respond spiritually, and even prayerfully.

It was thanks to spiritual and prayerful reflection that Saul was able to *fully* embrace his experience on the road to Damascus. It is a splendid pow moment indeed. Saul is struck blind after encountering Jesus in a vision complete with flashing lights and a voice which even his companions hear. He completes his journey to the city to await further instruction. That alone would have been a great story. There was plenty of wonder in the lights, and the blindness and the voice. But Saul takes it further. He responds spiritually by choosing to fast and purify himself so he can better process *everything* he has experienced. This enables him to understand it with his whole being, not just his mind, or past experiences.

One spiritual practice turns to another, because right in the middle of this morning's text we find that in addition to fasting, Saul is praying. God tells Ananias, who is sent to help Saul, that despite his horrible past, Saul can do some good work. This Saul who opens this morning's reading "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,"² is someone who can work for God. This Saul, who sought out permission to round up followers of the Way may yet do some good in God's name. God will use him to bring Christ's name before "Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel."

And that is God's spiritual practice in the life of Saul! Saul was on his way to Damascus, burning with conviction and breathing threats and murder, searching to oppress this new way of understanding God which the Christians were embracing and promoting, and POW! Everything changed. It turns out that the way Saul thought he was going wasn't his way at all. Instead of opposing and oppressing the people of the way, Saul becomes one of them. Instead of *blocking*

² Acts 9:1.

their way, *he joined them on it*. And he did so because he worked past the initial wonder of the flashing lights and holy voice, and into the deepest impact of his splendid and well known pow moment. He reacted spiritually. He opened himself to God's guidance through fasting and prayer, and as a result God worked with him, and through him, to change and transform his way in the world.

At their best and deepest, pow moments go well beyond *providing only wonder*. They are more than lights and voices and moments of "aha!" When we embrace them and open ourselves to them spiritually, they can also *purpose our way*. That's what happened to Saul. His way became Christ's way in the world. He thought his purpose was to work *against* Christ, but God purposed his way to walk *with* Christ.

Now we come to the inevitable question in any sermon: where are *we* in this? As a *church*, what have our pow moments been? Is there a moment in the recent or distant past when together we felt we were moved by the Holy Spirit to adjust or redirect our shared way in the world? Is there a place where the path of our way joined more fully with the way of Christ?

One particular pow moment since I have experienced here looms large in my memory and echoes often through my heart. It happened in our visioning potlucks about a year and a half ago. As we shared our thoughts about the future of our church, and the ways in which we might better embody God's love for the world, someone suggested that we become an Open and Affirming church. Doing so sends a clear message that we—unlike so many who also travel under the name Christian—*welcome* Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersexed and Questioning people into the life of the church fully and with open hearts and arms, and that we celebrate every way of loving as a sign of God's presence in the lives of the lovers.

People rallied around the idea immediately. Many were surprised that we weren't ONA already. You could really feel the Spirit moving in that conversation. So, after some discussion, and spreading the news to the rest of the congregation, we soon became an Open and Affirming Church. It was a wonderful process. And it would be easy to get caught up in the wonder of it. As it is, the encounter with the Holy Spirit alone makes a great story. But there are other questions lurking for us here: how will we take it further so God can, too? How can we, as a church, embrace this decision spiritually in order to *purpose our way* in the world?

True, we have established an ONA Committee, which is doing some great work raising awareness. Our movie nights have drawn people from each of the Hampton towns, and other towns, as well. We have some great events coming up, too. That is all wonderful; but is there more?

All too often it is easy to let good works and good news get stuck between the four walls of the church. All too often it is easy to restrict the good news to only being an event for Sunday mornings, somewhere between breakfast and lunchtime or sports. How can we be more like our missionary brother Paul in bringing the good news to the wider world? What can we do to spread the message past the roads of Westhampton?

One simple and fun way to do that is to take our show on the road. Specifically, on to the main drag in Northampton. In six days the annual Gay Pride March will be held there, and we are signed up to march and have a booth there. Joining in the march is a simple and powerful way to witness to our understanding of the good news in a broader setting. It is also one of the most affirming moments I have ever experienced as a person of faith. Last year we marched surrounded by United Church of Christ members from a number of nearby towns. There was a huge swath of us holding up signs proclaiming God's love for all and singing and chanting, when a most remarkable thing happened. We were cheered on for being people of faith and proclaiming a God of love. Not once. Not a little bit. There were absolute roars of appreciation and an outpouring of support just for being people of faith who imagined that God could love everyone. Friends, have you ever been there? In an age where our culture generally treats faith as an afterthought when it acknowledges it at all, this is an opportunity to witness to God's love *and to be **cheered on for it***: chance to affirm and to be affirmed. It is an amazing thing. A real >POW!< moment, indeed.

Joining in the Gay Pride March and the celebration to follow is one opportunity to *purpose our way* together, and to embrace something new while sharing the good news of our God of love. This is one way to react spiritually to the movement of the Spirit among us. This is one way to witness bodily to the love and grace we have received from God, and which God wishes us to share with everyone. I encourage you to join in the celebration, and to bring our good news before gentiles, and rulers and the people of Northampton witnessing to a God who has enough room for everyone in the wide embrace of all encompassing grace.

Amen.

Acts 9:1-20

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." ⁷The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. ¹⁰Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, ¹²and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." ¹³But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." ¹⁵But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; ¹⁶I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." ¹⁷So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, ²⁰and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."