

Two Short Parables

Parable of the River

From high mountain reaches it came, coursing down rocky crags and between wooded slopes until it reached the plain. There it flowed, wide and quietly strong, its pearly surface reflecting the glory of the sun above.

The City was built beside the River. It was built, in fact, because of the River. For the people, the River was Life. Its pure water abundantly satisfied the City's thirst and watered its crops; it provided a variety of fish for food.

For many years the City lived on the banks of the River in pastoral tranquillity. The City grew and expanded. It built many houses and great public buildings. Along the River it built docks and parks and bridges. With time, the people found ways to harness the River's force, and built sluices and waterwheels and such. One idea led to another, and a whole culture grew up based on the River. There was prosperity and health for all.

Eventually the idea of the dam came up. The people had seen the River's power; they lived from it. How much more could be accomplished by a great dam, which would store the River's mighty power and give constant energy that didn't vary with the seasons.

And so they said, "Go to now, let us make a great dam to harness the River's power." And so they did.

It was a great project, and worthy. After some years the dam was done and brought new benefits to the whole City.

No one, however, perceived a certain problem. Though the City had harnessed the River, they had also changed it. As time passed, they had less and less of a River and more and more of a lake. And as the River's constant flow was impeded by the dam, its once-sparkling water changed to a murky hue. The change was so gradual, however, that no one really noticed. The glory and the benefits of the dam blinded the citizenry to less obvious but more sinister realities. Sometimes sickness and disease would come to the City, but no one connected these things with the changes in the River.

Meanwhile, something else was happening. The pure water kept flowing down from the mountain heights, and with time the level of the River gradually rose higher behind the dam. Then one spring as the snows began to melt on the mountains, the River started swelling to new levels.

Early one April morning the townspeople were awakened by a new sound. The thunder of rushing, roaring water clung over the City and echoed through the streets. City officials and all the people rushed to the River to see what was happening. The River was there, and the dam was there — but the water was rapidly flowing away. The

dam had not broken, but on the far side of the River the earth had given way and a great gaping hole appeared. The River had broken through, and a foaming cascade of water surged and thundered through the breach. The water level began to recede, and the accumulated mud and filth of many years were swept away as the River poured forth in new power.

But consternation reigned in the City. The city officials called an assembly to determine what to do. Learned men reported on the situation and offered their theories. There were whispers of sabotage and subversion. Reports were heard that the River was now following a new course below the dam and surging across the plain, cutting a new channel.

There was, in fact, very little the city could do about the situation. But the City Council passed a series of resolutions. One condemned the whole lot of developments. Another forbade anyone in the City from going near the new River or drinking the water. And so time passed. The city engineers were unable to close the breach or harness the new flow. So the City learned to live with it, as cities will do. Most of the people contented themselves with living their lives, taking care of the dam (now nearly useless), and with writing books to explain what had happened. Adjustments were made and life went back to normal.

But not so with all the people. There was, it is true, one small group of the poorer sort who thought differently. These strange ones said among themselves, "Why stay here by a useless dam and a sluggish River? Why not move on to the lower plain and build a new City along the River there? Is it not the same River?"

And so they did. The City Council did not approve. There were threats and accusations and more resolutions. But notwithstanding all this, a hearty group set out and followed the renewed River to the plain below, and there founded a New City. With time the New City grew and prospered, drawing its life from the River. Docks and parks and bridges were built. The people found ways to harness the River's force, and built sluices and waterwheels and such. One idea led to another, and a whole culture grew up based on the River. There were prosperity and health for all.

And then one day (a hundred years after the New City was founded, more or less) someone said, "Go to now, let us make a great dam..."

—From *Radical Renewal: The Problem of Wineskins Today*, by Howard A. Snyder (Houston, TX: Touch Publications, 1996), 199-201.