



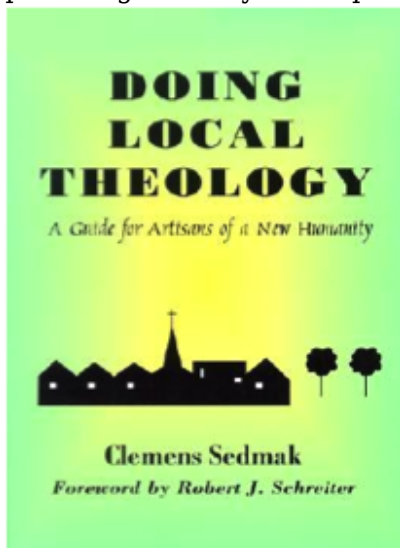
JOINING GOD IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD – HOW DO YOU DO THAT?

I was recently attending a meeting sponsored by TMN (The Missional Network) listening to a lecture about the nature of incarnational life and Christian mission. The speaker was pointing out that the God we confess in the Trinity is One who came to pitch tent right in the midst of the local, ordinary and everyday. He went to point out how, in our time, we had lost a sense of space wherein the everyday had been evacuated in deference to more universal values and commitments. Further, he suggested that we had reached a point where most leaders in regional and national church roles had fundamentally lost contact and the normal ability to enter, engage and be a part of the local.

At the end of his presentation we moved into the usual question and answer time. I was interested in what would happen because I was convinced this speaker had hit the nail dead on the head. In the midst of several rather strange questions about church growth, a tall, greying man wearing a dog collar and a red shirt leaned forward. He looked and sounded tired as he began framing his question. It was a very basic one but the poignancy of his concern could be felt. ‘Yes, I agree with everything you’ve said’, he began, ‘But how do you do it?’ The question seemed to be asked at two levels. First, he was recognizing that in all the demands on his life relative to the institutional demands of running an organization, he doesn’t have the time to reconnect with the local even though he knows it’s the place where we need to be. You can’t lead by exhortation! But there was a second question running beneath this obviously painful reflection. When he asked: ‘How do you do it?’ he literally was asking how does one enter the local? How does one engage a neighborhood in a way that brings gospel life?

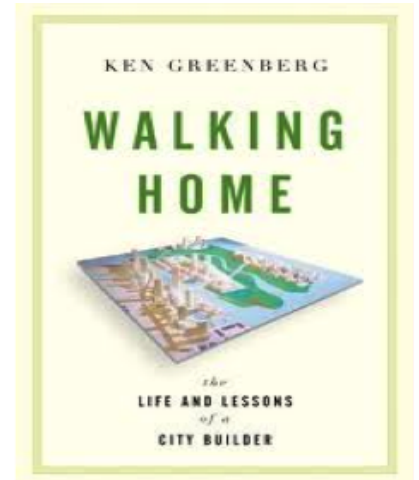
I was quite moved by the genuineness of this leader’s questioning. As I listened to the conversation that followed part of what came to my mind were three books written by vastly different people, that go directly to this question of ‘how do you actually engage the local in transformative, gospel-shaped ways?’. The first is by the Catholic theologian Clemens Sedmak (*Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity*, Orbis Press, 2002), the second by the urban architect, Ken Greenberg (*Walking Home: the Life and Lessons of a City Builder*, Random House, 2011) and the final one by Alexandra Horowitz, *On Looking: Eleven Walks with Experts*, Scribner and Simon & Schuster, 2012). What each has in common is a deep love and connection to the local. They are books embedded in the neighborhood and everyday. Each is full of wise help for any who, like that denominational leader, are wanting to know ‘how?’.

Sedmak, a London based theologian, writes from an explicitly Christian perspective. He is interested in providing a clearly developed practical contextual theology of the everyday. His focus is on assisting



Christians to awaken again to the deeply incarnational, local, physically embedded nature of Christian life and practice. His metaphors are wonderful. He writes about our need to ‘wake up’ much like Jesus in Gethsemane called upon the disciples to awaken and see the drama that was unfolding all around them. In a series of pithy, straightforward and theologically rooted ‘Theses’ Sedmak leads you through the processes for becoming a local, contextual theologian. It is much more than sitting in an office, reading books and constructing ‘ideas’ to teach others. Rather, it’s a masterful introduction in how to be a follower of Jesus by genuinely pitching one’s tent in the neighborhood. What I appreciate about Sedmak’s work is both his theological grounding of this journey and its rootedness in tradition. This is much richer and deeper than the latest flavor of the month. I could choose nothing better for that clergy person with the collar who asked. ‘How?’ than to say - read Sedmak and start practicing the simple principles he presents.

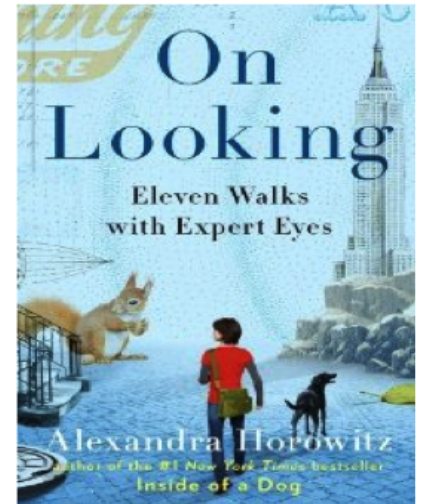
Greenberg's is one of those books that crosses genres. It's full of insight into the art of cultivating engagements with the local and the transformation of the imagination this requires. Greenberg, an architect, is asking how city neighborhoods become places of human thriving. He learned his trade in the early seventies just as we were recognizing that modernism had created cities that weren't contributing to such thriving. Older, mixed-use neighborhoods had been bulldozed and replaced with sparse, functional high-rise towers separated from work, play and shopping, in the conviction that the rationalization of efficiency would result in the urban utopia. Pathways through neighborhoods had been replaced by highways moving cars through cities, while minimizing face-to-face street-level engagements.



This socially constructed reality was the work of experts and professionals committed to the value that modern, rational, efficiency resulted in human thriving. Onto this stage stepped Greenberg's mentor – the decidedly un-professional Jane Jacobs. She thought very differently about the ways we need to build in order for people to live in thriving communities. Greenwood, a disciple and friend of Jacob's during her Toronto years, wrestled with these same questions. They couldn't work from a blank sheet but had to engage the already constructed reality of high towers that had ghettoized people, strip malls, distant shopping centers, highways that pulled neighborhoods apart and a whole host of bi-laws that regulated and prevented innovation from taking place. The people living in these environments were now deeply suspicious of another group of experts telling them how they ought to live. *Walking Home* chronicles the journey of discovering how to work with these neighborhood realities in order to cultivate a radically different imagination for living together in the city.

For church leaders wrestling with the hard realities of imagining how to lead in the local (which is where their focus and energy NEED to be) this book is a wonderful primer. They are caught in a nexus of habits and practices determined by organizational systems and institutions that did not come from any originating story of Christian life but were constructed for a time that no longer exists. The world that made this system work is long gone, even though its structures and imagination, like the high towers that still warehouse people, are still in place. Church leaders continue to struggle under the weight of systems that bear no relationship to the realities of the worlds in which people live. How do you creatively engage these realities? It is primarily about a return to the local. How do you create an alternative narrative that invites the people of congregations to join with you in constructing churches that contribute to the thriving of God's people? Greenberg may not have intended it but his book is rich in descriptions of how to go about this.

Horowitz's book is a simple but informative read. As a reporter with well-developed skills of observation she learned, walking with her three year old around the neighborhood, that she really didn't 'see' her neighborhood except out of narrow, restricted lenses and assumptions. The book reports on her expeditions into her neighborhood by inviting others to go with her and observe what *they* were seeing, that she was missing. In Sedmak's language, Horowitz creatively used the skills of others to 'wake up' to her own neighborhood. Each of the stories in the eleven walks she chronicles, is full of new discoveries about this ordinary, everyday neighborhood. It is full of discoveries about learning to see again through the eyes of the other. All it took was a willingness to become like a child, put one's hand in another's and be guided into new ways of seeing the neighborhood. Why would such a simple activity be so important? As that clergy person leaned forward and asked the question, 'how?' he was struggling with a whole world that would need to be undone in order to see. He was an 'executive' in a denominational system. His was a role on the ladder of a system in which he had authority, control, oversight. As an ordained man (a Bishop or similar?) he was 'in the know', a professional responsible for others. His question was deeper than he imagined. What Horowitz's book is suggesting is that you can't answer the question without becoming, again, a learner who puts their hand in another's and says: 'Guide me for a while. I need to learn to see all over again!'



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