

*Journey to a New World*  
Sunday, April 29, 2018

One summer morning in Maine, I received a lesson in the art of framing. I was sitting on a hillside overlooking Stonington harbor outside the home I was visiting. An artist, who was also visiting, was sitting in the next chair. We were idly chatting but mainly enjoying the sunshine and the view of the harbor. He admired a sailboat on the horizon, but I couldn't find it in all the expanse of sea and sky, so he instructed me to look for the vertical lines of a house and a mast and then, once I'd found them, to look above a horizontal boundary of telephone and electric lines to frame the area where the boat sailed. I followed his instructions and found the boat. "Frames are helpful," he said, "in helping us find what we're looking for and understand what we're seeing, but sometimes they can prevent us from seeing."

And he went on to tell me about an exercise he often led in a workshop for art teachers. He tells them to draw a square or rectangle on their paper. Then later in the session he uncovers a table with an arrangement of objects and tells them to draw what they see. At the end of the exercise the students always complain: "I couldn't fit everything in the square." "You should have told us to draw a big rectangle." And he responds, "I never told you everything had to fit into the frame. That was your assumption."

It's been more than 20 years since that summer conversation, but I have never forgotten his lesson in how frames both reveal and obscure. And as with the visual, physical world, so with our inner, mental worlds. All our lives we are presented with frames, even though we often don't recognize them as such. Some frames are facts:  $2+2=4$ ; the sun always rises in the east, dolphins are mammals; the capital of Australia is Canberra; and summer will come! But some frames are assumptions: listening to opera is weird; daydreaming is bad; the purpose of life is to make lots of money; everyone should put himself or herself first. Assumptions like these frame understandings of our lives and our world often without our realizing it, because we don't even see the frame. We regard what falls inside the frame as normal or true and anything that falls outside it as abnormal or false. Many people live their whole lives without ever questioning the limits of their frames. But there are those who like Oliver Wendell Homes' nautilus which push through their frames, sometimes over and over, building ever more stately mansions with their lives.

John Lothrop, the first minister of our congregation, seems to have been such a person. John Lothrop was born in Yorkshire, England, in 1584. This was a time of religious upheaval in England. Henry VIII, you probably remember, had

become a Protestant to allow himself to divorce Queen Catherine of Aragon and marry Anne Boleyn. But England's brand of Protestantism wasn't as radical as that of Martin Luther and John Calvin. In some ways, Henry just substituted the King of England for the Pope. The King was the head of the Church of England as the Pope was the head of the Roman Catholic world. And with the King drawing his authority from God, not from the people, the Church of England was not exactly an embodiment of Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. In the England Lothrop grew up in, the Church of England, like the Roman Catholic tradition it had split off from, had one absolute authority, a hierarchy of priests, bishops, and archbishops, and a set form of ritual and prayer. Moreover, in England, unlike in Roman Catholic countries, not attending Anglican services could be an act of treason, since it was an act against the authority of the king.

After receiving his undergraduate and master's degrees from Cambridge University, John Lothrop was ordained as an Anglican minister and moved to the county of Kent to serve a congregation there. He was 25. Fifteen years later he resigned as minister of that congregation and moved with his family to London to become the minister of an Independent, or Puritan Separatist congregation. Somehow he had broken out of his frame.

We don't know what the change in his thinking looked like, what question or contradiction began his to examination of his assumptions about God, the church, humankind and human and divine authority. All we know is the result – that he left the safety – financial, theological, and physical safety – of the Anglican church for the freedom and the danger of the Puritans.

The Puritans, like many religious reformers, wanted to get back to their roots. "Radical" after all comes from the Latin word for "root." They wanted to get rid of what they saw as the vestiges of Roman Catholicism in the Church of England – reading rote prayers from the Book of Common prayer, churches filled with statues, gold, and incense, and a hierarchical clergy. They wanted to make the church more like their understanding of how the early followers of Jesus practiced church – meeting in homes for study of the Bible; spontaneous, shared spoken prayer; and a meal. No pomp and circumstance, just simplicity. The Puritans wanted to purify the Church of England – they thought they could return that institution to this model of the early church. Many of them attended Anglican worship as well as worshipping in private and in secret with their fellow purifiers. The Separatists, however, had given up completely on the Church of England. They worshipped together in small groups in private homes and did not attend the services of the Church of England. That made them easier to pick out – because they weren't in church – and made them liable to punishment for treason. Somewhere in his years as an Anglican priest, John Lothrop had moved from

conformity to this radical, separatist view. And the Independent church he served, as you might guess from the word “Independent” was a Separatist congregation.

Under Lothrop’s ministry, the congregation grew, and their absence from worship in the local parish church became more noticeable. On a Sunday afternoon in April of 1632, as the congregation worshipped in the home of a member, agents of the bishop stormed into the room and arrested all who were present, including their minister. They were jailed, tried, asked to swear an oath of loyalty to the king, which meant adhering to the king’s religion, and when they refused, returned to prison. While Lothrop was in jail, his wife Hannah became ill and died. Friends cared for their six children. At last, in 1634, after two years of imprisonment, Lothrop was released with the understanding that he would quickly leave for America. In September 1634, he, along with his children, and other members of his London congregation arrived in Boston. Others from Kent who shared their views of religion had already settled in Scituate, where they were waiting for him to come to be their minister. So Lothrop and his party traveled down the coast to join them and found the First Parish in Scituate. According to the journal of then Governor John Winthrop, also a Puritan, Lothrop rejoiced in finding in the new world, “a church without a bishop. . .and a state without a king.” He was at last free to live by the frameworks he had developed, rather than under frames imposed by others.

After a few years, disagreements arose in this congregation about the nature of baptism. John Lothrop and some of the congregation moved to Barnstable where they gathered the First Parish of Barnstable. He lived and ministered there until he died in 1653.

But the church in Scituate continued on after he left, and for 384 years this congregation has continued on in the spirit of John Lothrop and those who founded it with him, always striving and re-striving to question the doctrines and beliefs others would attempt to impose on its members, always examining, taking apart, and re-building the frameworks of belief. In the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, our ancestors questioned assumptions about the nature of God and Jesus and humankind, breaking with their Puritan tradition and becoming Unitarians who believed that God did not predestine some to heaven and some to hell, but that each person had the ability to work with God for his or her own salvation. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century our ancestors rebuilt their framework around what it meant to be human to include enslaved people and became abolitionists. We have repeatedly enlarged frameworks around gender identity, first supporting rights for women, then giving women authority in the governance of the church, then, more recently, understanding gender as a spectrum and welcoming those who find their place along it. In relationships, we moved from expecting wives to promise to obey their husbands in the marriage covenant, to removing that word, to doing the work of

becoming a welcoming congregation and wrapping the whole church in a rainbow banner. And more recently, we are working with our frameworks around issues of race, privilege, and inclusion. This is a congregation of ever expanding frameworks.

Like Kay Shaw's butterfly painting with butterfly wings sweeping across the boundaries of the frame, so we have continued to follow the intellectual and spiritual journey of John Lothrop, letting the power of new understanding, new glimpses of truth lead us to break through old constraints and assumptions.

John Lothrop left England for a new world in America, but perhaps the greatest journey he made was in his village in Kent, when he dismantled the framework of belief which confined him to journey into what he felt was a life-giving faith. As he shone as a beacon of that faith, so may we, his spiritual heirs, continue to shine as beacons of a questioning and growing search for truth and lives lived by its light.

- Pamela M. Barz

*The Chambered Nautilus* by Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.

This is the ship of pearl, which, poets feign,  
Sails the unshadowed main,—  
The venturous bark that flings  
On the sweet summer wind its purpled wings  
In gulfs enchanted, where the Siren sings,  
And coral reefs lie bare,  
Where the cold sea-maids rise to sun their streaming hair.

Its webs of living gauze no more unfurl;  
Wrecked is the ship of pearl!  
And every chambered cell,  
Where its dim dreaming life was wont to dwell,  
As the frail tenant shaped his growing shell,  
Before thee lies revealed,—  
Its irised ceiling rent, its sunless crypt unsealed!

Year after year beheld the silent toil  
That spread his lustrous coil;  
Still, as the spiral grew,  
He left the past year's dwelling for the new,

Stole with soft step its shining archway through,  
Built up its idle door,  
Stretched in his last-found home, and knew the old no more.

Thanks for the heavenly message brought by thee,  
Child of the wandering sea,  
Cast from her lap, forlorn!  
From thy dead lips a clearer note is born  
Than ever Triton blew from wreathèd horn!  
While on mine ear it rings,  
Through the deep caves of thought I hear a voice that sings:—

Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,  
As the swift seasons roll!  
Leave thy low-vaulted past!  
Let each new temple, nobler than the last,  
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,  
Till thou at length art free,  
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresisting sea!