



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

A New Thing

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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Thus says the Lord, "I am about to do a new thing; it now springs forth, do you not perceive it?" I've spent a great deal of time this week pondering this passage, hoping for it's fulfillment but not completely sure what that new thing might be. But I have a couple of ideas. Humankind has spent millennia exploring and exploiting the world and all that dwells therein. We have conquered much with our ingenuity. We learned to plant seeds and domesticate animals. Water is pumped into the desert to make it bloom; coal is dug from the ground to keep us warm. Distance has been overcome by cars, trains, airplanes and telephones. Information that we never knew we needed is now one click away. We have devised many tools for killing each other. We have heard words of wisdom and some of them have been applied, incompletely. There are no more places to explore on earth, we've mapped it all, climbed the mountains and sent submarines to the depths of the seas. We know what this earth looks like from outer space and human feet have walked on the moon.

There is only one place to do something new and that is within us. The awakening of human potential is more exciting than conquering the Wild West. We are beginning to take seriously the question of what it means to be human. What we are and can be has always been here, we have caught glimpses of our extraordinary potential in scattered surprises. But up until now, we've been too busy to really look within ourselves.

In the 1960s Buddhism began to enter the world's stage. Wisdom from thousands of years filtered into western consciousness. Yoga and meditation were encountered with varying degrees of curiosity. The Beatles made a splash when they went to India to meet with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the founder of Transcendental Meditation. At its core, meditation is about peace, inner peace and profound connection. But there's more to it. The Maharishi drew on his tradition's sacred writings that claim that violence could not occur in the presence of those experiencing the deep peace and oneness. He set out to show this to the world. He encouraged his growing followers to study the impact of meditation in places where at least 1% of the population was actively meditating. The findings were surprising. It was during a time of increasing crime, but in towns where groups of meditators had come together, crime quickly fell 8%. In towns where there were no meditators, crime increased 8%. Encouraged by this success, the Maharishi took on bolder projects. In the 1980's, at the height of the conflict between Lebanon and Israel, over 600 meditators around the world, many within the middle east, experimented with their combined minds focused on peace. When the groups were actively engaged, deaths from the hostilities fell by 75% in Lebanon. And in Israel, crime plummeted and even car accidents and fires decreased. It was extraordinary, but apparently no one cared.

In 1993, Washington DC was considered the murder capital of the world. The Transcendental Meditation organization planned another experiment, in collaboration with the Police Department, the FBI, major universities and independent criminologists. Meditation sessions were held throughout the city that summer and more and more people joined in. When the numbers reached between 2500 and 4000 meditators, crime rates began to fall, eventually accounting for a 23% reduction in murders and other violent crime.

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That was 20 years ago and most people in Washington now have no idea that it happened. But apparently it is the most effective and inexpensive way to combat violence and crime. It is also a glimpse into the question of what it means to be human.

This question about humanness and human potential seems to be cropping up all over the place. Major universities all across the country have departments studying what goes on in the brain and what happens to the brain when we do things like meditate and practice mindfulness. They look at the hidden potentials of communication, brains working together. It is an extraordinary time and if you hover, helicopter style over the news you can begin to see things emerging. The information I presented earlier came from the latest issue of a terrific magazine called *The Intelligent Optimist*. But everywhere you look, there are articles on meditation being used in corporate America, in the military. Breakthroughs in neuroscience are revealing more and more the capacities of our minds to influence our health and well-being. It strikes me that the more that we learn, the more we uncover something we've had all along – the image of the human as revealed in Jesus Christ.

What I find myself wondering and hoping is that we are finally ready to accept what Jesus offered us – a bigger view of who we are and how we fit into all that is. Wouldn't it be funny if after Christianity's contentious relationship with science and other religions, the deep message of Christ came into bloom through them. That would indeed be a new thing, a new road in the wilderness.

There are other pieces to the puzzle of this new thing; Brené Brown's work on vulnerability is gathering momentum. She'll be on with Oprah today, stepping out of her academic surroundings to bring her work to a vast audience that might not see it otherwise. At the core of Dr. Brown's work is the message that authentic connection is a big component of what it means to be human. She is helping us all do something about the things that interfere with connection.

I've seen really hopeful initiatives – things like men stepping forward and saying, real men don't rape, real men don't need to be violent. Real men are in control of themselves. There seems to be a growing awareness of the destructive power of inequality. If we're meant to be in real relationship with our fellow humans, then we will care about the things that harm so many of them. A caveat here, you have to look closely to see this because it is all interspersed within Sandy Hook and Syria, racism and hatred.

But here's the thing, perhaps even the age of war may be passing. And when that time comes, it might just be because of a town in the middle of India where 9000 specially trained mediators have gathered and dedicated their lives to creating peace for the whole world.

Now that will be something to see. A new thing springing forth.