

Suzanne Mascioli* came from one of the poorer parts of town where immigrants first settled and began to build their lives in a new country. Her family worked in a small grocery store, and when she was not in school, she worked there as well.

We met on our first day at the new school. She was very shy and would not speak in class for a long time. When she finally did, we discovered that she had a speech impediment from a cleft palate that made it hard to understand what she was saying. Suzanne had difficulty hearing in one ear, and with the addition of braces on her teeth as time went on, I am afraid she did not enjoy a high social status in the class. Suzanne would only look into your eyes for a moment, and then she would quickly look down at the floor. When we were given the Iowa tests, she showed her results to others, not realizing that she had the lowest score by far of everyone in the class.

I remember that we were given hearing tests that year. One by one, kids would go to the doorway and cover the ear facing the hall, and Miss Oestrich would say something in a low voice which you would have to repeat. Sometimes it was something quite funny. Then, you would turn around and do the same thing for the other ear. When it was Suzanne's turn, she could not repeat what was said because she could not hear in one ear. When she turned the other way, the teacher said words to this effect: "I truly believe I can do anything I set out to do." It was nothing like the sentences she had given the rest of us.

Suzanne blushed deeply, so we knew she had heard. Miss Oestrich said, "Please repeat what you heard." She shook her head, deeply embarrassed. Again, our teacher said, "Suzanne, I want you to look at this class and tell them exactly what you heard." And after going back and for the like this for a while, this young girl who did not like to speak because of her speech impediment finally stood in front of us and softly said, "I truly believe...I can do anything...I set out to do." Miss Oestrich said, "Now *I* didn't hear you. Say it again?" And Suzanne opened up in her full, imperfect voice and said, "I TRULY BELIEVE I CAN DO ANYTHING I SET OUT TO DO." And she walked back to her seat. I don't know who was more surprised, Suzanne or the rest of us sitting there in our chairs, when we applauded.

At recess, she often chose to stay in the class and do her work, explaining that she had a lot of catching up to do. My father once stopped the car at her family's grocery store for a quick errand, and I went in with him. She was at the counter, and I recognized some of our text books on the shelf behind her.

As we moved on through school, I saw her less and less as we took different classes. After high school, most of my friends went off to college, and she enrolled in a business school in a run-down brick building across the street from my church.

That was the last I knew of her until a high school reunion many years later. She arrived in a blue business suit with her hair and make-up perfectly done. She was still Suzanne, but she looked you right in the eye with an air of confidence when she spoke, and she smiled. She smiled because the braces were long gone, and an operation on her cleft-palate had given her a clear voice. While many of us had moved away from upstate New York, she had taken her parents' little grocery store and parlayed it into a small chain called Mascioli Markets. And, this is where I would leave the story of a girl from whom it was once demanded to tell us about how she had faith in her ability to achieve what she wanted and expected from her life, except that I

looked her up yesterday on the internet, and as a post-script I would add that her construction company is listed as having between 10-49 employees and sales of between 1-4.9 million dollars. The listing also says, “Woman owned.”

The writer of Hebrews says, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” When I think of Suzanne, I don’t just think about how surprised I was to see her in such full possession of her life when others had written her off. Rather, I also think of times in my own life when I came to a standstill; able only to look at the shambles that surrounded where I found myself to be—a shambles only because I lacked the wherewithal to have the faith, the strength and the resources to believe I could change what I had come to accept and look ahead to a better tomorrow. And I don’t think I am alone in this. Who hasn’t come to a place in life where the challenges overwhelm and where belief in oneself, let alone in a higher power, is hard to find?

William Sloane Coffin said, “But if faith puts us on the road, hope keeps us there. It is hope that helps us keep the faith, despite the evidence, knowing that only in so doing has the evidence any chance of changing.”¹

And, as Henry Ford once said, “Whether you think you can or not, you are right.” In other words, it begins up here in the knowledge, and down here in the heart; this belief that you can change your own life and make a positive difference in the world. You have more power than you know.

In 1972, NASA launched the space probe Pioneer 10. According to Leon Jaroff in *Time*, the satellite’s primary mission was to reach Jupiter, photograph the planet and its moons, and beam data to earth about Jupiter’s magnetic field, radiation belts, and atmosphere. Scientists regarded this as a bold plan, for at that time no earth satellite had ever gone beyond Mars, and they feared the asteroid belt would destroy the satellite before it could reach its target. But Pioneer 10 accomplished its mission and much more. Swinging past the giant planet in November 1973, Jupiter’s immense gravity hurled Pioneer 10 at a high rate of speed toward the edge of the solar system. At one billion miles from the sun, Pioneer 10 passed Saturn. At some two billion miles, it hurtled past Uranus; Neptune at nearly three billion miles; Pluto at almost four billion miles. By 1997, twenty-five years after its launch, Pioneer 10 was more than six billion miles from the sun.

And despite that immense distance, Pioneer 10 continued to beam back radio signals to scientists on Earth. “Perhaps most remarkable,” writes Jaroff, “those signals emanate from an 8-watt transmitter, which radiates about as much power as a bedroom night light, and takes more than nine hours to reach Earth.” The Little Satellite That Could was not qualified to do what it did. Engineers designed Pioneer 10 with a useful life of just three years. But it kept on going. By simple longevity, its tiny 8-watt transmitter radio accomplished more than anyone thought possible.

Have some faith that we have within us abilities that we may not even yet be aware of. The writer of Hebrews lists Abraham and Sarah, and Isaac and Jacob, living out their lives to the end believing that they were looking forward to some greater purpose, even if they would not live to see it. He is telling his audience that while you can always pick up and leave—give up and step back from whence you came, the only thing to do that honors yourself and your place in this world is to stand firm, have faith in what is to come, believing that we all have some role to play in what the future looks like.

God can work even through someone with 8-watt abilities. God cannot work, however, through someone who quits.²

It is never the right time to give up on yourself and to do so is an act of selfishness, for there are so many ways that you are needed in the world. If we give up on ourselves, if we hate ourselves, we can never love others for love is the gift of oneself. How will you make a gift of that which you hate?

It is not the right time to give up on our world; not when the world has become so dangerous and peace and mutual love and respect for the world and for each other have to be sought for the sake of our continued existence as a species. You are needed to be the active hands of Christ in the world.

If that seems grandiose, who would have thought that other relatively powerless persons could bring shifts in history? Gandhi, an unsuccessful lawyer, adapted the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount and the writings of Tolstoy and became the key to bringing independence to India, because he was ready.

Rosa Parks, in refusing to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery, sparked the beginning of the civil rights movement of the '50s and '60s. She was an inauspicious person to take such a critical action, but she was ready.

Nelson Mandela was sentenced to life in prison. He was released to bring a shift in the politics of South Africa at a critical juncture when many thought either that change would never come or if it did, it would be accompanied by a vast bloodbath. The transition to a more just society came relatively peacefully under his leadership after he was unexpectedly released from prison. Prison had prepared him, made him ready.

And, Mother Teresa, an unpretentious nun, is being considered for sainthood for her simple act of trying to rescue people from the streets who might otherwise die. She was ready!³

The writer of Hebrews says, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." These are good words to end on. But I have a special place in my heart for Miss Oestrich and a hearing test she once gave a young girl. I'll say it once, and I'll test how good your hearing is. "I truly believe...I can do anything...I set out to do...Amen."

Sermon Resources

1. William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville. 2004. pp. 18-19.
2. Craig Brian Larson, "Pastoral Grit: the Strength to Stand and to Stay" Bethany.
3. William E. Keeney, "Preaching the Parables," CSS Publishing

* Masciulli—I have changed the name to protect the subject. This is not the correct name, but one very close.

Scripture for Sunday, August 12, 2007

Hebrews 11: 1 - 3, 8 - 16

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2 Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. 3 By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old--and Sarah herself was barren--because he considered him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore."

13 All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, 14 for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

The author has urged his readers to recall the time after they were baptised: they endured hardships: – public abuse, persecution and “plundering of your possessions” ([10:34](#)), accepting these privations cheerfully “knowing that you ... possessed something better and more lasting”. So, he urges, “do not abandon ... that confidence of yours” ([10:35](#)). “You need endurance” ([10:36](#)) to “receive what was promised” (i.e. eternal life with Christ). Christ will come again; keep your faith in him.

In the Revised English Bible, [11:1](#) reads “Faith gives substance to our hopes and convinces us of the realities we do not see”. Through faith we know that, at creation time, the invisible was transformed into the visible by God’s command (“the word of God”, v. [3](#)) and that the course of history (“worlds”) was set by God. The author now gives examples of Old Testament figures who lacked the “promises” (v. [13](#)) we have but even so had faith in God; they “received [God’s] approval” (v. [2](#)). “Abraham” (v. [8](#)) trusted that he would have a land to inherit; he didn’t know “where he was going”. He (as we do) lived a temporary life on earth (“in tents”, v. [9](#)) as he “looked forward” (v. [10](#)) to living permanently (“foundations”) in “the city”, the heavenly Jerusalem, “a better country” (v. [16](#)). In this he is seen to resemble the Christian believer. (Most translations say that Sarah received the “power of procreation”, v. [11](#)). Through the faith of Abraham and Sarah, many “descendants were born” (v. [12](#)). These figures (exemplars) saw that Christ would come (v. [13](#)). (In Genesis, actually only Abraham said he was a *stranger and a foreigner*.) God is proud (“not ashamed”, v. [16](#)) of them for electing to exercise trust in him; he has prepared a place for them in heaven.