

Drawing New Maps: Risk and Reality

Have you ever seen ancient world maps? They're fascinating. The beautiful, hand-done calligraphy and ornamental drawings on these maps reflect great artistry and imagination. Our modern maps are, by comparison, fairly plain. They are straight-forward, utilitarian guides for orienting ourselves. And so while we are profoundly grateful for the clear help we receive (and often need!) from modern maps, we can't help feeling drawn to the beauty, adventure, and mystery conveyed by those glorious, ancient maps.

One particularly intriguing ancient map shows Europe about four times the size we now see it on our maps. Another shows California as a tiny island. Clearly these were great distortions. How did the sailors and other travelers of the ancient world ever navigate by them?

Perhaps our favorite old map shows the entire ancient world as it was then known, from north to south and east to west. At the perimeter of the unknown areas are elaborate decorations: images of wild, rolling waves and raging winds. There, also at the edge of the unknown, are printed the words, "Beyond this point there be dragons!" Such words would certainly guard against careless navigation. Venturing into uncharted territories could have fearsome results.

Maybe the efficiency and clarity of our modern maps disguises the fact that even today, most of us still have vast tracts of life and experience that are uncharted and menacing. For us, as well as for the ancients, there are edges of our understanding beyond which it seems, "There be dragons." For some of us the edge of safe, known territory is our family, our group, our church or synagogue, our town or our nation. Beyond these we fear, "There be dragons."

But suppose we never venture out of safe territory. Might the "maps" we've constructed for our lives be as distorted as the ancient world maps? How would we know? How much perspective have we allowed ourselves? If we stay only in our protected, well-known space, our vision will surely be limited. Perhaps some of the difficulties we all experience in life are due to our efforts to navigate by old, outdated, or distorted "maps." Maybe we see ourselves as larger (and more important) or smaller (and less significant) than we really are. Maybe the real shape and position of things is quite different than what we've drawn them to be.

Ed Friedman is a writer who tells us that there is a relationship between risk and reality. The willingness to risk encountering a new point of view, or a new vision, or a new calling, could actually change reality for us. Just think: Maybe beyond the boundaries of our comfortable, well-known territory there is a whole new world. But its discovery can't happen unless we risk crossing that line into where we're worried "there be dragons."

Consider the risk, but set sail. Discovery lies ahead. For many of us, after all, the changed reality of our lives is asking us to venture out right now. So as people of faith let's go, and we trust we never travel alone.