

By the book or thinking outside the box

There are two types of problem solvers: those who stick to what's worked before (by the book) and those who venture beyond the book into more creative adventures. *By the book* means *thinking within the box*. For instance, we play football within a box, a rectangular playing field. Any stepping outside its boundaries stops the play; the trespass doesn't count; traditional rules and penalties permeate the game. But sometimes people don't stay within the box. Indeed, management consultants since the 1960's encourage their clients to think outside the box – with exercises like the “nine dots puzzle” or the “candle box test” and so on.

Tom Sawyer was a “by the book” fellow if we judge by the way he tried to help Jim, a runaway slave, escape his confinement in Silas Phelps' locked cabin. Huckleberry Finn recommended the boys steal the key out of Phelps' britches, open the cabin door and everybody run for it. Tom ridiculed the idea; the plan had to be more complicated than that. After all there were all those books like *The Count of Monte Cristo* that described all sorts of ways heroes might escape their dungeons. Tom thought they could dig there way into the cabin using their penknives as a standard way of getting in or out (even though nearby there was a shed with picks and shovels).

Tom also thought of a saw to saw off the bed leg to which Jim was chained. Huck wondered why they couldn't just lift the bed leg and slip the chain off that way. Tom thought that was the “infant-schooliest” way of doing things. It had to be more complex. Tom even regretted that the cabin wasn't surrounded by a moat (as in the books) and suggested they should dig one. Or he felt they would need a rope ladder, though the cabin was one story high. Of course Tom *already knew* that the late Widow Douglas had emancipated Jim in her will – and they could just tell Silas Phelps simply to let Jim out.

Way back in the Bible King David felt the urge to build a Temple for God to live in – as did other nations. To which God said he had never lived in a house or been so boxed and didn't intend to be now. And in the Gospels it's the Pharisees and scribes who operate by the book – the endless laws and rituals whereby religion is organized. Food laws, no contact with aliens, no work on the Sabbath – even of the least kind – hands washed ritually. If you became sick in any way it could be because you broke a rule, sinned. So stay within the box – even for hygienic reasons.

Then along came Jesus. He sees a paralyzed man – therefore a sinful one? He tells him his sins are forgiven. The Pharisees are shocked. Only God within their box's standards can forgive sin. So Jesus then says: *Oh is that so; watch:* and he says to the man: *Get up and walk.* Ouch! He has healed someone on the day of *prescribed* rest! Again at synagogue on the Sabbath he meets a man with a withered hand. Pharisees are present, watching. They are not interested in the man's being cured but in whether Jesus will break the Sabbath law. Jesus says, *Watch!* And heals the man's hand anyway.

Jesus operates by grace, compassion, care which challenges us always to operate and even think “outside the box”. This, of course, will get him killed in our everyday world.

