

“Not Afraid of Changing”

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Reading

From John O’Donohue in *To Bless the Space Between Us*:

The beauty of nature insists on taking its time. Everything is prepared. Nothing is rushed. The rhythm of emergence is a gradual slow beat always inching its way forward; change remains faithful to itself until the new unfolds in the full confidence of true arrival. Because nothing is abrupt, the beginning of spring nearly always catches us unawares. It is there before we see it; and then we can look nowhere without seeing it.

Change arrives in nature when time has ripened. There are no jagged transitions or crude discontinuities. This accounts for the sureness with which one season succeeds another. It is as though they were moving forward in a rhythm set from within a continuum.

To change is one of the great dreams of every heart – to change the limitations, the sameness, the banality, or the pain. So often we look back on patterns of behavior, the kind of decisions we make repeatedly and that have failed to serve us well, and we aim for a new and more successful path or way of living. But change is difficult for us. So often we opt to continue the old pattern, rather than risking the danger of difference. We are also often surprised by change that seems to arrive out of nowhere. We find ourselves crossing some new threshold we had never anticipated. Like spring secretly at work within the heart of winter, below the surface of our lives huge changes are in fermentation. We never suspect a thing. Then when the grip of some long-enduring winter mentality begins to loosen, we find ourselves vulnerable to a flourish of possibility and we are suddenly negotiating the challenge of a threshold.

Sermon/Homily: “Not Afraid of Change”

My sermon today is inspired by the song “Landslide” by Stevie Nicks. Thank you, Troy [and Hiroya] for bringing that into worship today. It was just stuck in my head, as I reflected on my recent journey to ordination and what I wanted to share about that with all of you. Nicks wrote the song while staying in Aspen and facing a crisis of whether she would become a success or not, whether she could risk it all for a dream. It’s also

widely believed that the song is about her relationship with her father and with her partner, Lindsey Buckingham.

Those lyrics, speaking about being afraid of changing, because you've built your life around another person, really get to me.

I have felt that way, at times. Afraid that if I changed, the stability of my life and my relationships would be endangered. But then, Nicks says, time makes you bolder, and even children get older. We have no choice but to get older too.

In another part of the song, she asks the questions:

Can the child within my heart rise above?

Can I sail through the changin' ocean tides?

Can I handle the seasons of my life?

Those are questions I've also asked as I have continued the process of growing up, changing, and becoming. How can we navigate those inevitable changes? How can we not be afraid of changing?

Because change is a truth we cannot escape. Change may be the only constant we can rely upon. I think about what novelist Octavia Butler wrote in her novel *The Parable of the Sower*, in which the protagonist creates a new faith based around change: "All that you touch, you change. All that you change changes you. The only lasting truth is change."

So how have I changed? Well, I first began attending OUUC in 2001, when I was 22 years old. I had been a UU since I was 15, and had attended two other congregations. I was a college student, coming to Olympia to move in with my boyfriend (who is now my husband of almost 20 years). I didn't have any kids yet. I sporadically attended worship and sometimes showed up for young adult things. And during those years I got married, lost a pregnancy, had children, did graduate school, solo parented while my husband Noel was deployed to Iraq for the war, ran a home daycare, and started volunteering in RE because my son didn't really want me to leave him in the classroom so I figured I might as well teach.

I then became your Director of Religious Education in 2008, after a very long search process that felt like a six month job interview. And my relationship with this community changed profoundly, as I made the shift from a congregant to staff. In many ways, the warning to members who become staff for a congregation is that they need to be prepared to lose their church. It is simply a different relationship, and a different way of

relating to the community. Not bad, not a complete absence of support or belonging or loving and right relationship, but different.

While that was an obvious threshold, there was plenty of change during the last 13 plus years I've served as religious educator here. I was just turning 30 years old when I began the work, and, really, when I first started I had no idea what I was doing. On my first day I got here and found a lovely bouquet of flowers on my desk from Melanie Ransom, who had been on the search committee that selected me, with a note about "digging in". But as I looked at the little DRE office which was in the kitchen closet back then, I had no clue where to begin that digging in process.

Our minister at that time, Rev Arthur Vaeni, was a supportive supervisor, but he frankly told me he didn't really know what I should do, just he'd know when I was doing it wrong. And that's how we went on for a long time, with me just doing what seemed right to me and somebody letting me know when it was wrong. I also found support from religious educator colleagues in the local cluster of the Liberal Religious Educators Association, or LREDA for short, many of whom took the time to answer my questions and mentor me. Consequently, it will always be a priority for me to pass that on and support and mentor new religious educators as they enter this work.

Sometimes folks will ask me how I became a skilled storyteller, and I will marvel that you've all forgotten and given grace to my early attempts at it. In the first year, I had my weekly meeting with Arthur and he said once "it was a better story, but then I was sitting there and thought "what is the actual point of this? – and that's not good. You always have to have a point to it, Sara." I've taken that to heart, and I try to always have a point to the stories I tell. But really, it's years of practicing and not some innate gift that makes it work.

I also dove into the official professional development offered through both LREDA and the Unitarian Universalist Association. I entered the credentialing program, which was a 3 year course of study. I was awarded the Master Level Credential as a religious educator in 2014. It was an amazing experience, with a huge amount of growth and learning for me.

And this congregation really deserves a lot of credit for supporting that professional development. I was encouraged, given study leave time and sabbatical to finish the process, and when I returned you all enthusiastically celebrated the hard work and expanded my job description to include lifespan religious education. I also want to give you props for taking fair compensation seriously as well. As I increased my qualifications and skills, this congregation followed suit by moving salary to the

recommended level on the new scale. That's something many in the larger UU world warned me would never happen – the conventional wisdom being that if you want to advance and be recognized with an increase in salary you will have to move and change to a new congregation. But here you all valued growth and took it seriously.

So three years ago, when Rev Mary came to us as our new settled minister and my new supervisor, I shared with her that I was thinking about going to seminary to become an Interfaith Chaplain. I had felt called to ministry for many years, but also knew that my type of ministry was basically what I was already doing. And I didn't want to move or leave Olympia, so I kept telling myself there was no point to seminary then. But darn it, I do love to keep learning and growing and that call just wouldn't go away. I discovered the Chaplaincy Institute and realized it would be a good fit for that growth and deepening.

Rev Mary, and this whole congregation again, were supportive of my ministerial formation work. Again, support, study leave, and a sabbatical helped me complete the course of study, and I became ordained in April. It was a joyous threshold for me and surprised me in a way. I had thought it would be kind of like a birthday. Sure, you are "older" now, but it's not like you really wake up one day feeling hugely different than the day before. But no – the ritual mattered. I took vows, made promises, and felt myself changed by doing that.

It's been a lot of changing, and here I am, still with all of you. Here is where I have built my life, as the Stevie Nicks song puts it – I've built my life around you. And still I'm not afraid of changing, and it has been a joy to me that it doesn't feel like you all have been afraid of me changing either. Our relationship has changed over time, many times, but it still remains. I feel truly blessed to be in a place that allows me to grow and change.

And I am not the only one who has been changing! It's perhaps most obvious in the kids. When I began as DRE I had a 2 year old and a 5 year old I was parenting. My kids came with me to work a lot, and effectively grew up here. Anissa, who is now our very fabulous Religious Education Assistant on staff here, was in the high school group when I began as DRE. She was among the high school youth I went to Romania with for a partner church visit one year. And our current high school kids were the babies in the nursery. I've been here long enough to have kids that I taught for preschool graduate and bridge. In just a few years, some of the babies I helped dedicate will also be adults.

That transition, of growing up, involves many renegotiations of relationship. As I am now parenting a 16 year old and a 19 year old, my relationship with them is shifting and

becoming adult to adult. We remain in relationship, but the relationship also changes as they and I change.

But while it's easier, perhaps, to notice the changes in children and youth as they grow older, as Stevie Nicks pointed out, we're growing older too. All of you adults in the congregation are all growing and changing too, and this community as a whole is constantly changing. New people arrive, others leave. Beloved traditions fade, and exciting new things happen. And we all, each in our own way, are learning and changing and being transformed in some way by the process of being alive. The only constant is change.

That's what it is to be in a living tradition, and that is what it is to be in a healthy relationship. Healthy relationships leave room for growth and change, while also giving acceptance to what is. And in our Unitarian Universalist practice, this is where our 3rd of the 7 Principles comes in. It's a principle that doesn't get as much attention as some of the others, but it's my favorite:

Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations. It's a balance, a dynamic Both/And, to accept someone as they are right now, to hold them in love and grace as they are today, in this moment, and to also encourage them to spiritual growth. Sometimes the hard part may be the acceptance now, like when a person is in some way irritating or harmful and we'd just love for them to grow out of that. How can we accept the person who is flawed? To be clear, I am not saying we have to accept harmful behavior, or not hold people accountable for their actions. But if we bring the example down to the toddler age, we continue to accept the 2 year old with love and grace and care, even as we firmly let them know that biting or hitting is not OK. Hopefully all of us adults have already grown past biting and hitting when we are frustrated, but we may have other ways of handling our frustrations that we also need to grow out of.

The other side of the Principle that can be challenging is possibly less obvious. What about when growth means that something we enjoy or even cherish is lost? When my kids were little, they would hold my hand as we walked. The day my son pulled his hand away and said he was done holding hands was a sad day for me, but it was also part of his growth. We can't keep others stuck in stages that don't allow their growth, no matter how much we may love them. People will change and no longer fulfill certain roles or needs for others. The caretaker will someday need care, the jokester may become sad and quiet, any number of changes will occur. We may feel a sense of loss in the process.

Change and growth are not without their difficulties. We may fear to change, we may fear that others will change. Or we may, like the hen Harriet in our story today, seek external change of scene when what we really need to do is work on our own internal changes. Some changes will be improvements, and some may not. How can we, as a community, hold each other in the kind of loving and healthy relationship that makes room for change and encourages growth?

Author, facilitator, and activist adrienne marie brown asks the question this way in her book *Holding Change*:

“How do we attend to generating the ease necessary to help us move through the inevitable struggles of life and change? How do we practice the art of holding others without losing ourselves? This ... is about attending to coordination, to conflict, to being humans in authentic and functional relationship with each other – not as a constant ongoing state, but rather a magnificent, mysterious ever-evolving dynamic in which we must involve ourselves, shape ourselves, and each other.”

My experience at OUUC has been one of a magnificent, mysterious, ever-evolving dynamic. I've been held in ways that have allowed me to grow and change. I hope that I have held each of you in that same way, in a way that accepts and loves you as you are and also encourages you to spiritual growth. Our relationships here are based in covenant, in mutual promises and commitments we make to one another. It is my promise and my commitment, to myself, my calling, the world, and to you all, that I will hold the Both/Ands of Acceptance and Growth, Stability and Change, The Past, Present, and Future, Enough and What More, Grace and C'mon Now. I commit to being in relationship in ways that hold others without losing myself. I commit to growth, and to navigating change with all the grace I can.

We're all just sailing along, navigating the changing seasons of our lives, and our one shared home. Change is inevitable along that life journey. May this community be a container that holds us, loves us, supports us, accepts us, and encourages all to spiritual growth. May you each find room to grow, and still be held in relationship. We will have to renegotiate those relationships over time, but may we always cultivate love and grace as we do so.

Thank you for all these wonderful years of growth we have shared together so far, and I look forward to many more.

I now invite you all into a moment of loving and growth encouraging silence, as we integrate what we have heard today into our hearts.