

***"Too Close To Home" -
A Sermon For Sunday, Sept. 26, 2010
By Mark Albright***

Good morning. Those of you who know me best know that my sermons tend to really be about me, and this one is no exception. The genesis of my talk today was a bout of musing a few months back over the significance of having a newly called minister and all of the changes that might bring to our congregation. As I gleefully reviewed my own mental list of things I couldn't wait to see changed at the UUCLV, my mind turned toward aspects of worship and adult education that ****I**** really enjoy, and I began to wonder, with just a bit of anxiety, "but what if he starts trying to change the wrong things?" Hence, today's sermon.

"It all depends on whose ox is being gored" is an old saying. The derivation of the term may be an obscure verse in the book of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible relating to awarding of compensation for injured cattle. Basically, though, it means that a given event or circumstance is seen very differently depending on the degree to which it involves a viewer's own self-interest.

At heart, most people seem to love and embrace change. Former British Prime Minister Harold Wilson said: *"He who rejects change is the architect of decay. The only human institution which rejects progress is the cemetery."* The Romantic poet William Blake, not surprisingly, found a more poetic way to say it: *"The man who never alters his opinion is like standing water, and breeds reptiles of the mind."*

The truth, of course, is that in almost every instance, change is a bittersweet process at best. For every crowd of people cheering some alteration in the way things are done, there is another group mourning the passing of what they see as a beloved tradition. Anatole France observed that: *"All changes, even the most longed for, have their melancholy; for what we*

leave behind us is a part of ourselves; we must die to one life before we can enter another."

Capturing the irony perfectly, Henry Miller quipped that: "*The man who looks for security, even in the mind, is like a man who would chop off his limbs in order to have artificial ones which will give him no pain or trouble.*"

When I was growing up in the late sixties and early seventies, writer and futurist Alvin Toffler penned a very successful book called ***Future Shock***, in which he addressed the possible consequences of what, even back then, seemed to be an increasingly accelerating rate of change in American society and the world in general. It was Toffler's belief that the rapid pace at which change is proceeding could actually cause a sort of mental harm to those unable to cope with it.

This "future shock", distilled to its essence, is a personal perception of having experienced "too much change in too short a period of time". At its release, ***Future Shock*** was all the rage and its author appeared on every talk show available to spread his gospel of the need to better manage change and our adaptation to it in society. One of Alvin Toffler's quotes about change back in the seventies still seems quite apt today:

"You've got to think about big things while you're doing small things, so that all the small things go in the right direction."

As a member of the board of trustees, I can tell you that last quote gives us fits when we find ourselves unable to support a particular cause or project which, though meritorious, doesn't quite fit with the near- or mid-term goals of the church. Truly, there ***IS*** no harder task than "thinking about big things while you're doing small things, so that all the small things go in the right direction."

Alvin Toffler, like most folks, didn't come up with **all** the answers on how to deal with inevitable change in our world, but in my opinion he hit fairly close to the mark with the notion

that often, it can be the **pace** of change – as much as the nature of the change itself – that somehow overwhelms our ability to keep up. So just how do individuals and groups get a handle on change processes? Have we learned anything from systematic study of how better to handle change? The answer is “yes”. There have been a number of scholarly treatments of change processes in a corporate setting and many, if not all, of the lessons learned there are at least illuminating in the case of non-corporate groups poised to experience change.

Colin Carnall, author of *Managing Change in Organizations*, has described change in the corporate context as “*the continuous adoption of corporate strategies and structures to changing external conditions.*” That said, there are really two types of change encountered in the business world and elsewhere:

Organizational Development - the more gradual and evolutionary approach to change; and

Reengineering - the more radical form of change management, that challenges all elements of processes or structures that have evolved over time (*not unlike the arrival of a new minister has been known to do*).

So it turns out, according to Colin Carnall and others, there are fairly predictable phases encountered in managing change processes. Whether in a corporation or other organization wishing to experience positive growth and change, successful leaders will want to know in which phase of change they should expect what types of situations and problems. Normally, people perceive change processes in seven typical stages, which can be described as follows:

(1) Shock and Surprise

Confrontation with unexpected situations. These situations make people realize that their own patterns of doing things are not suitable for new conditions any more. Thus,

their perceived own competence decreases.

(2) Denial and Refusal

People activate values as support for their conviction that change is not necessary. Hence, they believe there is no need for change; their perceived competency increases again.

(3) Rational Understanding

People realize the need for change. According to this insight, their perceived competence decreases again. People focus on finding short term solutions, thus they only cure symptoms. There is no willingness to change their own patterns of behavior.

(4) Emotional Acceptance

This phase, which is also called ‘crisis’, is the most important one. Only if leaders succeed in creating willingness for changing values, beliefs, and behaviors, will the organization be able to exploit its real potential. In the worst case, however, change processes will be stopped or slowed down here.

(5) Exercising and Learning

The new acceptance of change creates a new willingness for learning. People start to try new behaviors and processes. They will experience success and failure during this phase. It is a change manager’s task to create some early wins (e.g. by starting with easier projects). This will lead to an increase in people’s perceived own competence.

(6) Realization.

People gather more information by learning and exercising. This knowledge has a feedback-effect. People understand which behavior is effective in which situation. This, in turn, opens up their minds for new experiences. These extended patterns of behavior increase organizational flexibility. Perceived competency has reached a higher

level than prior to change.

(7) Integration

People totally integrate their newly acquired patterns of thinking and acting. The new behaviors become routine.

Only if change managers understand these phases of change, and only if they act accordingly, will they be able to successfully manage change processes without destroying people's motivation and commitment. Here at the UUCLV, not only the board and committees, and certainly not the pastor alone, but each and every one of us plays a part in the growth and development of this church. As we do so, bear in mind that **each** of us is wrestling with the impact and direction of change in an institution which means a great deal to **all** of us (if you stopped paying attention for a minute, what I'm saying is that **no individual** among us has a corner on the market when it comes to "caring about the church"). In the words of the old saying to the Caterpillar: *"you can fly, but that cocoon has got to go!"*

We would hardly be good Unitarian Universalists if we examined the subject of change and failed to look at how world religions view the subject. One of the most basic and fundamental Teachings of **Buddhism** is change. Transience and impermanence are just two of many words used in Buddhism when discussing change. Buddhists see change in the seasons and climate, changes in society, changes in the world with the rise and fall of different countries. Some changes, like the birth and aging of the Earth and Sun, occur slowly and over billions of years. Others, like the changes that occur within the millions of cells in our body, occur so rapidly and minutely we sometimes fail to notice them. The one thing that does not change is the **Dharma** - or truth - that all things are always changing.

It is not enough for practicing Buddhists to know about change intellectually. They must thoroughly understand it with both mind and body. They must be able to recognize any

changes that are continuously occurring around and to them. A true understanding of change is reflected in their lives by how they are able to adapt to it.

In a tale from the **Tibetan Book of Living and Dying**, a Buddhist master confronts a student who accuses the teacher of uttering mere platitudes about impermanence in life. The teacher responds this way:

I say to him or her: ‘Have you actually understood, and realized, the truth of impermanence? Have you integrated it with your every thought, breath, and movement that your life has been transformed? Ask yourself these two questions:

Do I remember at every moment that I am dying, and everyone and everything else is, and so treat all beings at all times with compassion?

Has my understanding of death and impermanence become so keen and so urgent that I am devoting every second to the pursuit of enlightenment?

If you can answer ‘yes’ to both of these, then you have really understood impermanence.”

Now, I don’t know about you, but for me those two questions really resonated. I’m not sure whether that’s because I’ve actually come close to dying at several points in my life, or whether they embody a truth that transcends individual conditions.

Judaism, too, has had to cope with changing times and mores, despite its grounding in thousand-year-old traditions and practices. Halakhah is a branch of rabbinical writing outlining the laws of Jewish religious and ethical behavior. A proposal for new Jewish family values in a post-halakhic time by a writer named Ackelsberg in 1992 suggests that Jewish families can live outside traditional religious ideals and the demands they make on personal, family, and social life. Such families construct their values according to the forms of Judaism that fit their

experience and reflect their desires for traditional observance. Throughout the Jews' long history, the family and the home, incorporating the desires of private rather than public life, provided identity and security. Until they gained legal rights, during the period of emancipation in eighteenth century Europe, Jews had little reason to identify with the state.

The classic Jewish texts, and the social habits they had prompted and sustained, were an essential source of high rates of marriage and childbearing among Jews in the premodern world. However, traditional control of the family began to decline as Jewish thought and society made way for new ideas, science, and democracy. With emancipation and then the Jewish Enlightenment the Jewish family, like other institutions, changed in response to greater social and economic opportunities. Less bound by religion, the family became more adaptive—a scene of growth and development, particularly for life in the large cities. Nevertheless, its traditional structure still prompted many to see it as the source of authentic Judaism.

For many Jews today the Passover Seder represents the meaning of the Jewish family. There is the ancient distribution of roles in the meal-based service. Women light the candles and men make the blessing over the wine. The youngest child recites the Four Questions, in effect guiding the entire family toward recognition of what is unique about the biblical events the holiday records. Thus, Jewish family memory can be intense even when an individual lives a largely secular and assimilated life.

The last religion I'd like to look to for guidance this morning on the issue of change is one for which change represents its single most important element: Confucianism. Confucianism is a philosophy of a way of life, though many people also consider it a religion. The overall goal of Confucianism is to educate people to be self-motivated, self-controlled and able to assume responsibilities; it has the dual aims of cultivating the individual self and contributing to the attainment of an ideal, harmonious society.

The Confucian system is based on several principles:

1. In the beginning, there is nothing.
2. The Great Ultimate (Tao) exists in the *I* (change).

The Great Ultimate is the cause of change and generates the two primary forms: "Yang" and "Yin" symbolize the energy within any system of counterforces: positive and negative, day and night, male and female, rational and intuitive.

"Yang" and "Yin" are complementary; in their interaction, everything -- from quanta to galaxies -- comes to be. Everything that exists -- all systems -- coexists in an interdependent network with all other systems.

3. The dynamic tension between "Yin" and "Yang" forces results in an endless process of change -- of production and reproduction and the transformation of energy. This is a natural order, an order in which we can see basic moral values. Human nature is inherently good. If a human being goes along with the Great Ultimate and engages in rigorous self-discipline, that person will discover the real self (the nature of "Tao") and **enjoy** the principle of change. And since all systems exist in an interdependent network, one who knows this truth also cares.

4. There are four principles of change in Confucianism:

1. Change is easy.
2. Change is a transforming process due to the dynamics between "Yin" and "Yang." Any change in either part ("Yin" or "Yang") will lead to a change in the system and related systems. This process has its own cycle of expansion and contraction.

3. Change carries with it the notion of changelessness; that there is change is a fact that is itself unchanging.
4. The best transformation promotes the growth and development of the individual and the whole simultaneously -- it strives for excellence for all systems in the network.

I think that Confucianism is a good place to end our discussion of change this morning, as I believe that religion may have the best handle on conceptualizing the role of change in organizational transformation. There is, within and around this church, as in and around each of our lives, a Yin and Yang – the operation of active and passive change forces – constantly at work. The needs of the world around us, the needs in our families and individual lives, are constantly changing and demanding some sort of compassionate and effective response from this church community. The notion that significant change can occur in the life of our church, or in the individual lives of its members, without impacting the whole **and** its constituent parts, is simply naïve, and even at odds with why the church exists. The growth and shifts in activity or programmatic emphases in our church over time are inherently bound up in – and identifiable with - the long line of individuals who have labored in the UUCLV as professional staff or member volunteers, and I think that’s as it should be.

I don’t know where exactly this congregation is headed in the future. The purpose of the sermon was not to soften you all up for some known drastic change that’s about to come, but rather, to suggest that the arrival of a newly called pastor is the perfect occasion on which to reexamine our core goals and purpose, and to do so with a view toward improving our effectiveness and outreach in our community, even as we strengthen our commitment to closer bonds of fellowship and family as a congregation.

It’s been said that *“if nothing ever changed, there’d be no butterflies.”* My wish for

myself, and my wish for all of us, is that we open our hearts and minds to the vision of a stronger, more loving, more inclusive UUCLV that seeks to make a genuine difference in Bethlehem, in the Lehigh Valley, and in the world beyond, by being open to change, even when – no, ***especially*** when – that change impacts our own cherished habits or traditions.

BLESSED BE.
