

Closure and New Beginnings

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org
Rev. Paul Beckel, with Rick Beckel
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Vice and virtue were the warp and woof of our first consciousness, and they will be the fabric of our last, and this despite the changes we impose on field and river and mountain, on economy and manners. There is no other story. A man, after he has brushed off the dust and chips of life, will have left only the hard, clean questions: was it good or was it evil? Have I done well - or ill?
John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*

One of the mixed blessings of being 20 and 21 and even 23 is the conviction that nothing like this, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, has ever happened to anyone before.

Joan Didion

My eyes already touch the sunny hill,
going far ahead of the road I have begun.
So we are grasped by what we cannot grasp;
it has its inner light, even from a distance—
and changes us,
even if we do not reach it,
into something else,
 which hardly sensing it,
 we already are;
a gesture waves us on, answering our own wave...
but what we feel is the wind in our faces.

Rainer Maria Rilke

GATHERING SONG *Circle Game*, by Joni Mitchell

CHILDREN'S FOCUS *Farfallina and Marcel*, by Holly Keller

REFLECTIONS by Rick Beckel

My time in school is winding down. During my final year of college, I've been wondering how everything I've been learning about for the last 15+ years is going to fit into my life after I graduate. I've had lots of conversations with peers about finally facing what many term "the real world"—and it seems to be a scary place. My fellow graduates and I have spent years learning about the plight of our species, and the number one New Year's resolution most of us have is to find a job that will allow us to help confront violence, systemic discrimination, and environmental degradation. We have two particularly crucial questions: *Where can I make the greatest difference? And where do I begin?*

One aspect of these questions that we regularly grapple with is where on the spectrum of action we must fall to be effective change agents. How far can we push the envelope without alienating the masses? How far can we compromise before compromising our values? To what extent do we have to work within the system, through traditional avenues of change (like markets and governments), to make truly lasting, large-scale change happen? Government institutions set precedents that define the priorities and parameters of our society for decades. Markets have far-reaching impacts on human and nonhuman

communities across the globe, and working for change in the private sector can thus have significant and tangible impacts.

Yet we also realize that working within the boundaries of our current political-economic system may fail to address its fundamental contradictions. To what extent do we, then, have to seek immediate and direct action? To be rabble-rousers, radicals, and revolutionaries? To dismantle rather than reform? In an era of imminent ecological collapse and intensifying economic and racial inequality, it sometimes seems like the time for revolution is nigh (which I suppose many of you have been saying for decades now). As I struggle to establish where on this spectrum of action I belong, I extrapolate from my personal experience to build a personal theory of change. I will give a brief example to illustrate what I mean.

Working for the Obama campaign in 2012—back when I was an idealistic sophomore in college—one of the primary ways we mobilized young people in Minnesota was by encouraging them to at least get to the polls to vote against the marriage amendment ballot initiative. If this amendment passed, marriage would be enshrined in Minnesota's constitution as between a man and a woman. The stakes were high—every other ballot initiative like this in other states had passed in previous elections. But Minnesota progressives knew this was an issue they could finally win on, especially with young people. Despite many young people being disillusioned with the political process in general, voters my age were impassioned to fight this ballot initiative, and turned out to the polls in record numbers. Many even volunteered during Get Out the Vote to talk to others who knew less about the crucial issues on the ballot. As a result of this mobilization, we defeated the marriage amendment and progressives gained enough seats in the legislature and gained enough political momentum to pass a bill that legalized same-sex marriage in Minnesota the following year.

This was incredible to me. Same-sex marriage was not an issue that a major American political party would have been able to mobilize around even a decade ago: after all, a Democrat in the White House signed the Defense of Marriage Act only 15 years prior to the election. Even five years ago, my mom began a Gay-Straight Alliance club at my high school, but students who decided to join were certainly articulating a view outside the mainstream. So how did we get to this point? How does an issue that was once politically untouchable suddenly become a mobilizer of the masses? To explore this, I'd like to talk a bit about another issue that appears far removed from LGBTQ rights: climate change.

This is likely my “favorite” global problem—it implicates everyone and forces us to question our lifestyle, our political-economic system, and historical distributions of power and privilege. Because of the myriad contributing factors, it is also one of the hardest issues to build a political platform around. Scientists and environmentalists have been talking about climate change for decades, but despite the magnitude and urgency of this problem, I have seen an astonishing lack of progress on this issue during my lifetime. And that's scary.

But maybe we're finally ready to begin. My hope with action on climate is that, soon, a critical mass of people across the nation and world will actively think about how their actions as consumers and citizens impact the interdependent web of all existence. We have probably reached such a tipping point with same-sex marriage. Though we still have lots of work to do, it has been remarkable to witness the rapid swing of consciousness on LGBTQ issues over the course of my political involvement in the past decade. But these recent victories, of course, did not come out of nowhere. These victories built upon decades of conversations, struggles, and campaigns not yet taught in high school history classes. I think that we are reaching a similar threshold on climate change. And this is because people everywhere are recognizing the urgency: of course climatologists and biologists at NOAA, but also politically moderate Americans, of course the Greenpeace/Earth First! crowd, but also sustainability managers at Wal-Mart. We see consciousness-raising in international negotiations led by outspoken island nations, recent

college graduates influenced by student fossil fuel divestment activists, and grassroots movements fighting against coal trains here in Bellingham.

We can see this threshold dynamic—long periods of slow incremental progress followed by rapid advancement—manifest itself throughout history. With this in mind, we can see that the radicals and the gradualists are both necessary, and indeed mutually dependent on one another.

Believe it or not, Milton Friedman, champion of the free market and economic advisor to Ronald Reagan, sums this up all well in his book *Capitalism and Freedom*. I quote: “only a crisis produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is *our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable.*” Some might see this as a concession, but I see it as powerfully optimistic. Today’s impossibilities are tomorrow’s inevitabilities. Keeping radical ideas alive, even if they aren’t immediately picked up and implemented, is imperative.

In the meantime, we must do what we can to find truth and meaning in our own lives and inspire others to do the same. We often lose ourselves in the past and the future, and sometimes forget to bring our full selves to the present. As we work to build a just and sustainable future, we must learn to be just to ourselves, and to practice personal sustainability. To learn from the past, to dream about the future, and to enjoy the present: this may be the best that we can do. I think that this will be my New Year’s resolution... for now.

MUSICAL MEDITATION

Feeling Good, by Nina Simone, sung by Tuesday Magee

REFLECTIONS

by Rev. Paul Beckel

The song Tuesday just sang was popularized by Nina Simone, who recorded it in 1965. That was 50 years ago—but the mix of anguish and confidence, impossibility and inevitability within that song speak to me about: right now.

Now maybe what I’m feeling is part of the vibe of *any* New Year—this sense of being on the cusp of something, maybe tragic, or maybe magic, but definitely alluring.

Or maybe it’s just me—also in my 50th year—at a stage of life with a lot changing: both inside and around me.

Or maybe there is a resonance in that plea, that lament, that resolve:

It's a new dawn

It's a new day

It's a new life

for all of us here, now: in 2015.

Back then Nina Simone had just changed record distributors, and on her debut album for the new company she for the first time openly addressed racial inequality with a response to the murder of Medgar Evers and the church bombing in B’ham, Alabama that killed four black children. From then on, a civil rights message was standard in her recordings and live performances. There was no going back. During this period she advocated for violent revolution, and hoped that African Americans could, by armed combat, form a separate state.

Of course I was blissfully unaware of all that. My parents' annual Christmas letters document the 1960s as a period of sugarplum stability. This week I received the latest installment of that series and it was a little jarring. The words still say all is calm, all is bright, but it came a few days late...and for the first time, the letter is handwritten, or I should say hand-scrawled—which is significant, because my father has always taken pride in his fine penmanship.

Also, without explanation, this time the envelope was stuffed with half a dozen of the old original letters, mimeographed on pastel paper, from random years dating all the way back to my early childhood. As if to suggest that the time has come to clear out the attic.

Naturally I zeroed in on what the old letters had to say about me back then, and here nothing much has changed. They mention that little Paul is doing lots of reading, fighting with his siblings, and inventing games.

The decades pass and then little Paul is having kids of his own who, in their own time, do lots of reading, fight with their siblings, and invent new games.

It is so weird to see these strong threads of continuity when it also seems that so much *has* changed. Intentional changes, accidental changes, and some changes that are just inevitable with the passage of time.

And changes, of course, that were predicted, but just haven't panned out.

Son, when I was your age, there were indications that racism was behind us. And war? Oh we had learned our lessons about that! So in the early 1980s, when an American military compound in Lebanon was hit by a suicide bomber, killing hundreds of Marines, we just got up and left. I mean, what were we gonna do? Go to war in the Middle East?

That same year in college I had a class on the economics of health care, and I learned that we were on an unsustainable trajectory of rising costs that would surely *and swiftly* lead in one of two directions: a total system collapse, or single payer universal health coverage. That was 30 years ago.

Here's a parallel story on a more personal level. Twenty years ago I was a ministerial intern. I remember my supervisor, Rev David Robins (who actually just retired this past week) I remember David warning me about the inevitability of a preacher's diminishing vision. He told me about how, the year he turned 40, one Sunday he walked up to the pulpit and suddenly he couldn't read the words on the page. I thought, that'll never happen to me. But I did get nervous when I turned 40. Then, when it still didn't happen I thought I was pretty invincible. But this year (as you can see) something has changed.

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So is change inevitable? Or impossible? Strong arguments can be made on either side. And sometimes, for better or for worse, a lot can change in a very short time.

Not that long ago Jane was urging me to jump into the very uncertain process of ministerial/congregational search. And I said no, thanks, I have quite enough changes and challenges right here.

But what was really holding me back was inertia, and fear, and congregationalism. Congregationalism, you see, is this glorious concept that congregations call their own shots, and call their own leaders.

Which means that congregations and ministers have nothing holding them together except a mutual agreement. Which could be interpreted to mean: hey, if everyone is getting along, let things be. Don't go looking for new problems.

And things were going pretty well in Wausau—about as well as ever after some pretty significant changes and challenges. And any new congregation, I thought, no matter how wonderful, is going to want change, and resist change, with all of its strength. Also, wherever I go, I'm just going to make the same mistakes again.

Besides, I thought, our congregation in Wisconsin had just begun developing relationships with some of the local Native American tribes whose traditional lands (which also happened to be watersheds for our drinking water) were about to be raped by a gargantuan open pit iron mine. I thought: there's important work to be done here, relationships to build, decisions to be made that will have an impact for generations to come. Where else would I ever find such important work?

Later this month I will be talking in more detail about whether that kind of work has anything to do with congregational life.

For now I'll just say that the most purposeful work I have ever done has been bringing up my children to take responsibility for their own future. But now, with the bulk of parenting behind me, I would like to imagine that my life still has purpose. I would like to imagine that the mistakes I've made could translate into some learning that I can still put to use. Perhaps here—in this liberal religious congregation, whose work, surely, includes preparing the generations to come to take responsibility for *their* own future.

And seeing that so many of the dreams of my generation remain as works in progress, I find my resolve renewed... now that I'm not just worrying about the challenges my kids will face, but that I can now work with them in partnership.

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As I thought about today's theme I came across a personal essay by Joan Didion. Looking back on her early twenties, and all of the promise that her life seemed to hold, she wrote:

“I could make promises to myself and to other people and there would be all the time in the world to keep them. I could stay up all night and make mistakes, and none of it would count.”
None of it would count.

And I read parts of James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*, in which he notes, about the same decade of his own life, that *everything* a black man does, does count. Having just witnessed a race riot, he wrote:

“...it now had been laid to my charge to keep my own heart free of hatred and despair....”

Where would he go from that moment forward? Despair would have made sense. And hatred, oh hatred would have been so satisfying, so empowering, so self-destructive.

Not that he could love the status quo, the system, the society which he called “too powerful, too complacent, too ready with gratuitous humiliation, and above all too ignorant” for his love. And yet neither could he walk away, his young life being already too woven into the fabric of society.

I flipped back and forth in the book to make sure I understood when he was writing. 1944. Not 1964. Not 1994.

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As 2014 faded into the past this past week, NATO officially left Afghanistan. (The ceremony was held in secret so as not to be disrupted by the Taliban) (And by “left” I mean they left behind a few thousand “advisors.”)

As 2014 faded, I finally got the nerve to buy Naomi Klein’s book “This Changes Everything” in which she argues that humanity is on an unsustainable trajectory, not just with carbon in the atmosphere, but with capitalism as we know it. It remains a best seller.

As 2014 fades, the reverberations continue from the impacts we felt when history’s most extraordinary powers, both military and economic, recently hit their limits.

And as 2014 fades, my family, my congregation, and I continue to ask: What can *I* possibly be responsible for in the face of forces that are so much bigger than me? What am I supposed to do when I’m caught between yesterday and tomorrow, both victim and culprit, neither invincible nor powerless?

In her memoir Adrienne Rich writes:

“It is another beginning for me. It’s a moving into accountability, enlarging the range of accountability. I know that in the rest of my life, the next half century or so, every aspect of my identity will have to be engaged. [she has referred to being white, black, middle class, WASP, Jewish, lesbian, mother...] [every aspect of my identity will have to be engaged:] the woman limping with a cane, the woman who has stopped bleeding, are also accountable. The poet who knows that beautiful language can lie, that the oppressor’s language sometimes sounds beautiful. The [soul] trying, as part of her resistance, to clean up her act.

And so it is for each of us, and all of us together: to renew our vision, every aspect of our identity will have to be engaged. Even us souls trying, as part of our resistance, to clean up our act.

SHARING OUR GIFTS

We build on foundations we did not lay.
We warm ourselves at fires we did not light.
We sit in the shade of trees we did not plant.
We drink from wells we did not dig.
We profit from persons we did not know.
We are forever bound in community.

Adapted from the Hebrew Scriptures