

In Flux

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org
November 19, 2017
Rev. Paul Beckel

Our lives are in flux. In a constant state of change. The things and the people that we care about, or count on, or at least notice to be real today, may be gone tomorrow. For some change we're grateful. For some change we're distressed or even angry. Sometimes change is bewildering. Sometimes we take it for granted; it's simply part of life. But is change itself beginning to change? Is there a limit to how much we can take?

Is it ever tempting to imagine that it's all an illusion? That what *really* matters is *unchanging*? That the truth/love/god, being absolute and perfect, will never change? That the majesty of the sea and the forests and the mountains that surround us — that these, too, are eternal?

If not, is it possible to make peace with change? Changes we choose, and those we do not choose? What sources do you call upon, what habits do you turn to, to help you keep steady? What principles or promises guide you through the seasons and the cycles of your life?

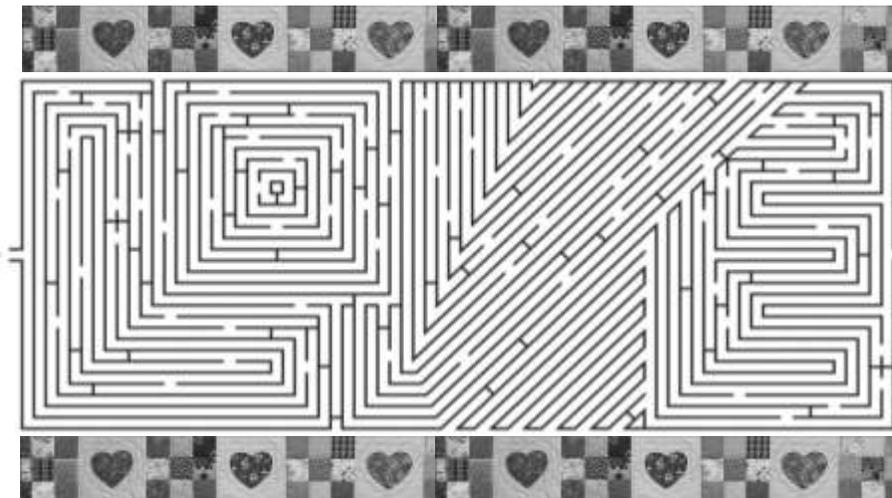
If our covenant serves that purpose, please say it with me: Love is the Spirit of this fellowship and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined in a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation. This is our covenant.

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

GATHERING SONG *#38 Morning has Broken*

CHILDREN'S FOCUS *Quilts for Lydia Place*

Some of us in Bellingham have a nice warm place to go to get out of the wind today. Some of us used to have a warm place, but then something changed. Today we're going to see and touch and feel some warm quilts that some people here at BUF have made to help. [BUF's dragonfly quilters group showed 16 quilts they've made, explained their significance to the kids, and presented them to a representative from Lydia Place, a local shelter for women and families.]



ANNOUNCEMENTS & GREETINGS

- Welcome visitors, coffee hour....
- Community 2
Community and the BUF
Immigrant's Rights Team
will host a festive tamale

fundraising dinner featuring vegetarian and chicken tamales, rice, beans, and salads...Saturday, December 16th at 6-8 pm. Tickets are available today at coffee hour. \$25.00 with all funds raised used to support C2C's work developing farmworker owned cooperatives, fighting for farmworker and immigrant rights, and climate justice.

- Interfaith thanksgiving service this coming Wednesday at 7 pm, hosted this year by BUF....
- **Finally, sometimes the most important announcement** is to state something obvious that we may have overlooked. So as a bridge today between our announcements and our time of greeting one another, I want to try something a little different. I invite you now to close your eyes if you wish.

//We have immersed ourselves today within a room of people with joys and sorrows that we will never know. We sit among friends and strangers whose inner lives are not going to be announced.

Each of us is in the midst of flux ... moving away from something ... moving toward something ... or fighting the current. We may experience these swirls of change as grief, or gratitude, or a little of both.

As we sit and sing and wonder and pray now together, may we stay mindful of the tenderness and the resilience within ourselves, within this room, and within the human family.

And in just a moment, may our wordless greetings convey this meaning: "I honor the place in you in which the entire universe dwells. I honor the place in you which is of love, of truth, of beauty, of peace. When you are in that place in you, and I am in that place in me, we are one."

And now with soft eyes and gentle hands, and very few, if any, quiet words let us greet one another.

ERACISM MINUTE

WELCOMING NEW MEMBERS Wanda York, Scott & Amoret Heise

REFLECTIONS, Part 1

It's pretty groovy to "go with the flow." It's also realistic to acknowledge that, in the flow, we are hanging impermanently between what we thought we knew and what we're about to find out.

We're in a stream potentially turbulent (but not always) and unresolved (but not always uncomfortable).

When we're in that stream, we may or may not have the presence of mind to recall the Navajo prayer: Beauty is above me and below me, beauty to my left, to my right, and within me. Beauty is the stream itself.

We may or may not have prepared ourselves to be so mindful of beauty when the stream changes, and rises, and we find ourselves up to our necks.

Over the course of our lives we've made conscious changes and unconscious changes. And all around us the world keeps changing, with or without our consent. Many of us have relocated. We've changed names, chosen families, discovered or rejected a religious tradition. We've become more, or less, free-spirited. We've changed our gender identity. Made a vow to stay sober. We've gotten older.

And if these changes are not disorienting enough, we are faced with simultaneous changes in *what it means* to be older, changes to what it means to be male or female or non-binary, changes to what it means to be a political independent, what it means to be Unitarian, Humanist, Christian, Pastafarian, or none of the above.

I'd like to share a bit about a couple of changes in my life, changes that I did not choose that have affected me profoundly. Maybe they always will. But who knows. I was reflecting this week about change in my own life partly because I needed something honest to say this morning, and also because I've felt a significant change within myself over the past several months as I've adjusted the medication that I take for depression.

So it occurred to me that it might be useful, it might provide some self-awareness and even comfort, to reflect on what has changed in my character, and what has not changed, within the context of depression, along with another life change that I did not choose.

So I started making a list of traits that I have seen in myself through the course of my adult life. I made a column for what I think I have lost, and what I have kept, through the depression, which began about 15 years ago, and through another significant change, my divorce, along with a wrenching child custody battle, almost 30 years ago.

In the first column I noted some things I think I've lost, such as idealism, exuberance, and a carefree demeanor.

In the next column I noted personal characteristics that I think I've largely held onto, such as creativity, perseverance, and goodwill. Then I found myself making additional columns: traits that I've found to come and go through the ups and downs, such as initiative, perspective, and resilience. And finally, a list of characteristics that are not strengths, but don't seem to have been

affected by all of this. For example, I've been impatient, uncouth, and socially awkward through it all, and maybe I always will be.

I wonder if this exercise occurred to me because something similar was recommended in a book that I frequently recommend and loan to people who are experiencing grief — especially if they don't realize that they are experiencing grief. The book is called *Ambiguous Loss*. It's about how difficult grief can be to recognize and resolve when something or someone we love is gone but not all gone. And here but not all here. Alzheimer's disease is the classic example, but once this phenomenon was brought to my attention, I've come to notice it again and again — in everyday changes, and in the big ones — in my own story, and others.

It's tough to get a handle on the bewildering reality of ambiguous loss. Unless *everything* has changed, we might not want to acknowledge that *anything* has changed. Our well-intentioned friends and family may discourage us from acknowledging that something or someone is gone when some physical or psychological sliver remains.

So in the exercise I've described, by making a list of those aspects that are unambiguously gone, we can finally mourn those losses. And by listing what remains, we can continue to enjoy these things, without worrying that enjoyment is some kind of betrayal.

And the exercise brought one more thing to mind: a moment when, in the midst of the divorce, I faced what seemed like impossible choices with unthinkable consequences. You see, I was determined to do *whatever it took* to ensure that I would retain custody of my son. My heart and my identity were wrapped up in being a loving father. And, at the time, I could not otherwise envision a good life — for Jonathan, or for myself.

But having pledged to spare no expense, and do whatever it took, when I found myself in the midst of intense legal psychological warfare, I had to decide how to respond. Would I fight fair? Would I lie, cheat, and steal when it seemed clear that these had become the rules of the game, and the tools that would be necessary to win?

On the other hand, was that the person who I wanted to become?

Maybe it would be ok. Maybe I could turn off my conscience and then turn it back on again later. Or would that make me the kind of person who turns off his conscience believing he can turn it back on again later? It was truly an existential crisis.

In hindsight I know that it was not all so clear cut. I have probably blocked out some of it. But one thought I recall — it was seared into my mind. I said to myself, or perhaps to a god that I did not even believe in, I pleaded: "Please do not let me become an asshole."

When I say this now at the pulpit I do not know whether to laugh or to cry. To apologize or just to hope that this story speaks to you. Not that I hope you have suffered an existential crisis. But

all of us have felt torn by the changes in our lives, torn by cross-currents, broken against the rapids.

Life can tear at us with intricately intertwining currents. The story I just shared involved both sudden changes and other changes that have taken place over many years. There were changes that involved conscious and unconscious choices, and other changes that were beyond my control. There was certainly no way to foresee the outcomes, and I must emphasize that it's not been a single outcome, but that each change has set up new circumstances for new changes, new choices, and perhaps some opportunities to gain courage, serenity, and wisdom.

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I'm intrigued by the maze on the cover of the order of service.

I see a metaphor there for life passing through love. I haven't analyzed this particular image closely, so I don't know if it gives us only one way through the maze. If I were to draw it, there would be several possible through-routes.

Along every route there would be spirals of ambiguity, corners at which it feels risky to turn in either direction ... and some long straight passages that seem clear sailing, where later we discover that these were not paths through love.

There would be some paths of least resistance, and highways of risk and rebellion. And finally, even on the right path, or right paths, there would be multiple traffic lanes. Some lanes would be covered in eggshells, hot coals, horse shit, or banana peels. Stepping stones down the median would come and go.

Along the way we'll see breadcrumbs and encouragements left by those who have traveled these ways before. And we'll encounter other travelers, with whom we will encounter still more changes, choices, and beauties, within this all-encompassing love.

MEDITATION / SILENCE

PHOENIX ENSEMBLE, with BUF Youth

Some Nights, adapted

REFLECTIONS, Part 2

In metallurgy, we start with ore, which is a mixture of the elemental metal and the rock within which it is encrusted. We cook up the ore at a very high temperature and add chemicals known as flux. The flux combines with the impurities, the parts we don't want to keep, lowering the melting point, so that the slag will more readily flow away.

Perhaps you've never thought about the flux in your own life as an agent for drawing off impurities. Maybe you don't like that metaphor. It involves a great deal of heat and potential discomfort. And maybe purity is not something you strive for. Well, you're in luck. Because

chemical fluxes can also be used in the smelting process to *add* impurities, trace elements that make some metals more functional.

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Wanda, Scott, and Amoret [new members today] have just thrown themselves into the BUF cauldron. I do not know if they have come to blend in, to be special trace elements, or to be the flux itself, to be the change. They probably do not know yet themselves. In all likelihood, like the rest of us, they bring a little bit of each of these elements, along with a little slag.

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I'm reading an intriguing and sobering book called *In Over our Heads*, by Robert Kegan. I have a feeling that there will be ongoing references to this in sermons to come ... but I'll just share a little today about the key premise. Kegan notes that there is every reason — for those of us attempting to deal with the complex demands of postmodern life — every reason to feel as though we are in over our heads. And even the most resilient of us can only tread water for so long.

Life is not harder for me than it was for my parents, or for my great great great grandparents. But the pace of change, and the expectation that we keep up with the changes in each dimension of our lives ... I hear more and more of you predicting that humanity is going to reach some kind of tipping point.

I don't want to suggest that we feel sorry for ourselves. But I do want to acknowledge that the dominant culture in which we live seems to demand that we achieve mastery in so many different aspects of life, every one of which is accelerating beyond our control. At work the knowledge-base of our professions continues to expand. In our private lives, for example as parents, we feel pressure to keep our skills up to date as the standards change.

As citizens who wish to contribute to the common good, our cultural awareness has to grow at a breakneck pace in order to be sensitive and supportive as norms change around cultural, racial, sexual, dietary and class diversity. I hesitate to say that as it may be taken as pathetic whining by an old straight white male omnivore. But I don't think I'm the only one struggling to keep up ... while life in Bellingham demands fluency in and passion for every environmental and human rights violation around the globe, every new yoga pose, breathing technique, microbrew, all 30,000 ways to simplify our lives, and every new retro ironic way to be an old-school hipster.

It's not just that we're overwhelmed with information. New discoveries in astronomy keep changing our understanding of where we are in the universe, while discoveries in nutrition urge

us to change our diets again, and discoveries in genetics tell us that what our families told us about our ancestry is all wrong.

But that's the easy part; that's just changing *what* we know to be true. What's hard is that changing media technologies now demand that we constantly re-assess *how* we know whether or not something is true.

In the spirit of getting comfortable with change, in the spirit of coming to terms with being here and now between what we've known and what we do not yet know ... I'm going to leave it there, for now. And yet, we are not left ungrounded. In our free and responsible search for truth and meaning we are blessed to have — within our living tradition — many sources to draw upon. We turn to these sources again and again to help us reflect upon what we know and how we know it.

So to close let's read responsively from this list of sources, printed on the insert within today's order of service. The sources are in the right hand column.

The Living Tradition we share draws from many sources:

- *Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;*
- *Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;*
- *Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;*
- *Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;*
- *Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;*
- *Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.*

In this list are resources that remain to us, sources of wisdom and understanding that may be fluid, but in essence have not been lost even in the passage of generations. Perhaps later you can make a list of other sources of authority that are lost, or that you've deliberately left behind in your search for truth and meaning.

Through it all may we journey together in beauty.

SHARING OUR GIFTS

SENDING SONG

#311 *Let it be a Dance*

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

CIRCLE 'ROUND