

“Forever Changed”
Rev. Megan Lloyd Joiner
Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society
June 1, 2014

Opening Words by W. Frederick Wooden

May our souls be united in praise and wonder
for that which remains still amid the flow;
for that which remains quiet amid the music;
for that which remains cool amid the heat;
for that which remains dark amid the blaze;
for that which remains alive amid death;
for that which remains while all is changing.
For all these let us give thanks and praise.

Chalice Lighting by Charles Howe

We light this chalice to affirm that new light is ever waiting to break through to enlighten our ways,
That new truth is ever waiting to break through to illumine our minds,
And that new love is ever waiting to break through to warm our hearts.
May we be open to this light and to the rich possibilities that it brings us.

Reading Gift from the Sea (excerpt) by Anne Morrow Lindbergh

Intermittency—an impossible lesson for human beings to learn. How can one learn to live through the ebb-tides of one's existence? How can one learn to take the trough of the wave? It is easier to understand here on the beach, where the breathlessly still ebb-tides reveal another life below the level which mortals usually reach. In this crystalline moment of suspense, one has a sudden revelation of the secret kingdom at the bottom of the sea. Here in the shallow flats one finds, wading through warm ripples, great horse-conchs pivoting on a leg; white sand dollars, marble medallions engraved in the mud, and myriads of bright-colored cochina-clams, glistening in the foam, their shells opening and shutting like butterflies' wings. So beautiful is the still hour of the sea's withdrawal, as beautiful as the sea's return when the encroaching waves pound up the beach, pressing to reach those dark rumpled chains of seaweed which mark the last high tide.

Perhaps this is the most important thing for me to take back from beach living: simply the memory that each cycle of the tide is valid, each cycle of the wave is valid, each cycle of a relationship is valid. And my shells? I can sweep them all into my pocket. They are only there to remind me that the sea recedes and returns eternally.

Reflections

Well, here we are. We have walked together just a short time - since February - and now the time has come to say goodbye.

Though we all knew our time together would be brief, my leaving is one more in a long list of transitions that this congregation has weathered in the past couple of years. In the spring of 2012, you voted to have a full-time minister for the first time in your fifty-year history. And in the fall of 2013, your first full-time minister, Rev. Claudia, retired early.

In the meantime, you made changes to your worship life and your community life. Babies were born and cherished members of the congregation died. Some of you lost the loves of your lives, parents, even children. And if all that weren't enough, your Board has been trying some new ways of doing things. New people arrived. Other folks left. This spring I joined you and brought my own changes. We tried some more new things in worship. I preached sermons on bible passages and talked about Jesus. Some of you loved the changes; some of you didn't. Today, more changes. We welcome eight new members! And my time with you is ending.

In August you will welcome Rev. Lyn Oglesby, your interim minister who will guide you through the interim process. It will be a time of reflection and introspection and, yes, more changes, changes that will hopefully provide opportunities for transformation.

Change. Most human beings are, by nature, conservative creatures. We like the status quo. We like routine. We like things the way they have been, the way they are. No matter how open-minded we may claim to be, for some of us, even the simplest change is enough to throw us for a loop, stress us out, make us angry.

Others of us thrive on change. We love the unpredictability of life; we like to shake things up.

Changes imposed upon us from the outside - usually from events beyond our control - can be positive or negative, gradual or completely unexpected, invigorating and enlivening, tragic and terrifying. Even changes we choose - getting married or divorced, having children, changing jobs, retiring, moving, joining a congregation - can be the same.

Whether we like it or not, whether we choose it or not, whether it affects our lives for the better or the worse, we know one thing about change: it is inevitable.

My colleague Rev. Nancy Arnold, who serves congregations as an interim minister, writes that change "is one of the few constants." But "change and transformation are not the same thing....How we choose to respond to - or resist - change," she says, "determines what transformations take place in our own lives."

Like many of you, my family has faced a dizzying array of changes over the past year. Just in the past two weeks, my spouse graduated from his graduate program and we invited family and friends to join in a ritual of naming and blessing for our daughter, Arden.

It is hard to believe that it was six and half months ago that she arrived, born on the rolling waves of labor pains, changing our lives in an instant. Each day since has been a marvel of tiny changes that we sometimes don't even realize are happening day by day, but a week goes by and we find ourselves saying: "Where'd our baby go? Who's this little girl?" We ask her: "What'd you do with our baby?" She giggles - and grows another inch.

I've been struck by the invitation that was offered me at my daughter's birth. Yes, our lives have changed - in a whole host of ways (including, but not limited to, severe sleep deprivation) - and I suppose we could have left it at that: what we could no longer do now that we are parents, what choices we had to make differently, what was now possible or impossible.

But I've heard it said that when a child is born, a mother is born too - or a father. How we choose to respond to the invitation offered by the changes a child brings is the spiritual journey of parenting. It is an invitation to

transformation, an invitation to say good-bye to an old self and to become someone new. If we accept it, this wild and un-expected invitation, then our hearts are reborn in ways we never would have anticipated.

This is true, I believe, for any change. While change is inevitable, transformation is not. With change, bidden or unbidden, comes the invitation for transformation, but our responses – our choices – determine whether and what kind of transformation takes place.

As Anthony and I rode high on the crest of the wave of Arden's birth, we received word of another life-altering change. One of our dearest friends was hit by a car just six days after she was born. You have heard me talk about Sam before.

There we were surfing along and then plunged into one of the deepest troughs either of us have ever experienced. In an instant our friends' lives were turned upside down, changed forever – and ours with them.

Five months after the accident, Sam slipped away from us for good, leaving his wife and young daughter and so many friends and family members awash in a sea of grief.

I have yet to wrap my mind around his loss. Grief comes in waves, washing over us at unexpected times and we are hit again with the realization that this new reality is a vastly different story than the one we had imagined. It feels so random, so scary, that everything can change in a split second. One minute here, gone the next.

This is the way of life, the way of intermittency, of ebb and flow, birth and death, in-breaking and out-flowing. We can all-too easily be buffeted by the surf, devastated by the ebb-tide, by the out-flow, dashed upon the rocks.

Or we can find ways to ride the waves. We allow ourselves be transformed by the tide. And all the while we seek the constancy of the ever-changing sea. We set our sights on the horizon. We reach for the long-view.

Over the past two weeks, I have been given the gift of the sea. My parents came up to Madison to be close to their granddaughter and rented a house on the shore. I've watched the gentle waves at dawn and at dusk. I've tracked the tides. I've seen storms blow in and out, and shells pile up on the beach. I've seen Gull Rock, steady as the tides rise and fall, constant even as it is pummeled by wind and wave and rain.

As the tide came in toward our little, rented, stretch of shore, a small outcropping of rock would steadily disappear until only a white cap remained. At high tide, the water lapped loudly on the rocks and submerged the concrete steps descending into the sound. There is an intoxicating fullness at high tide, an abundance that made my heart swell.

And then just as they came in, the waters steadily receded. The rocks appeared, the birds came to fish in the shallows, the shells showed their dazzling array of colors. And I settled into the stillness of the ebb-tide. It felt quieter, closer to empty, closer, somehow, to my grief. Then the cycle would begin again.

The other thing I saw during my time on the shore was that while the water was constantly changing, in and out, up and down, currents this way and that, it was also always the same. This is, for me, immensely comforting.

Perhaps the most important thing for me to take back from beach living is the same as it was for Anne Morrow Lindbergh who was no stranger to sorrow: I take too "the memory that each cycle of the tide is valid, each cycle of the wave is valid, each cycle of a relationship is valid."

And I take comfort in knowing that though everything changes and is constantly, forever changing, there remain constants. For me, lately, the constants for which I am most grateful are love and the holy, unnamable presence I call God. What about you? What keeps you steady in the ebb and flow of life?

We cannot stop the march of time. We cannot stop the tides or the crests and troughs of the waves. Our work, the work of the spiritual life, the work of the spiritual community is to learn to live with intermittency the best we can, to ride the waves of change, to live through the ebb-tides, to take the troughs of the waves.

The work of the spiritual life is to discover and give thanks for what remains steady in the midst of the inevitable transitions that mark our lives.

The work of the spiritual life is to wait for, to watch for and to give thanks for what is ever-new, ever-in-breaking, ever inviting us to be transformed.

This morning, this spiritual community welcomes eight people into membership. And in some ways, the congregation is like new parents. Eight new people on the scene. Like it or not, life here will never be the same! And you have the option of accepting the changes that come by welcoming new people into your midst: they might have some new ideas, they might bring some new foods, they might have a different story than you've heard before. You could leave it at that. Or you could choose to be transformed, to say goodbye to part of your old self and hello to something new, something waiting to be born.

I wish for each of you and all of you the courage to choose transformation. I wish for you the steady calm of spiritual constancy and, at the same time, I wish for you peace with intermittency, and the strength to move with the motion of the waves, to embrace the turning of the tides.

I have treasured my time with you and I leave you with blessings upon blessings as you make your way forward together.

Closing Words by Rev. Megan Lloyd Joiner

May you keep on moving forward together
boldly, proudly, loudly!

Go forth from this place in peace, with courage,
forever changed and forever changing.

May you know peace.

May you bring comfort.

May all be well.

Resources

Sermon: "Change is Inevitable – Growth is Optional." Rev. Nancy O. Arnold, February 5, 2012, Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Huntington, NY.

<http://uufh.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Feb-05-2012-Change-is-Inevitable-Growth-is-Optional-Rev.-Nancy-O.-Arnold.pdf>