

## Change is in the Air – October 22, 2023

Just over a month ago, the autumnal equinox was upon us – that celestial date when the sun is directly above the equator – marking the astronomical end of summer. This year, that took place on Saturday, September 23 at 1:50am Central Time. A little over twelve hours later, we enjoyed a bright, sunny day with a high of 67 degrees – a beautiful day that followed an entire week in the seventies.

In other words, it didn't feel like the start of Fall. But now here we are, nearly at the end of October with lows in the thirties and highs barely reaching the mid-50s. This is the weather of autumn – the transitional time between the summer that was and the winter yet to come.

And as the days have gotten cooler and the leaves outside have begun to turn their final colors of the year, I found myself drawn to the distinct, yet related, themes of Autumn and Change. And as I pondered those themes, I found two essays I'd like to share with you this morning.

The first one is based on a piece by James Ismael Ford – who originally wrote it as *Already Broken: A Buddhist Perspective on the Season of Spring*, but I've modified it for this morning to fit our autumnal theme.

>>>It was Fall. Not yet the bitter cold of December, but definitely not the warmth of late summer. With a scattering of frost and freeze advisories in the last few weeks, birds and bugs had, for the time, decided to vacate our area around Milwaukee. And to take advantage of what could be the last nice afternoon before next Spring, Jan and I decided it was time to barbecue. As I walked out into the back yard toward the old Weber, I glanced across at my concrete Ho-tei. And, I thought I saw a crack, a really big crack running right through him.

"Rats!" I exclaimed, walking over to give him a little closer examination. Sure enough, an enormous line ran up from the ground right to his neck. The damp and wild extremes of Midwestern winters had finally proven too much. As I realized this I thought back to how he had been given to me by the congregation of the Marin Fellowship, when I was leaving to join the fellowship up in Sonoma County.

It had been hinted that I was to be given a Buddha by the congregation, and I was sort of looking forward to it. But, when my friends presented me with the cast concrete yard Ho-tei, I felt a wave of disappointment wash over me. **Ho-tei**, also known as Pu-tai, while frequently called the laughing Buddha, is not a Buddha at all. In fact I had always found him a little annoying because in popular American imagination he frequently is the Buddha--a fat jolly guy seen either standing with his hands raised above his head, or sitting on the ground with one knee up.

Ho-tei always has a wide grin and an even wider stomach. Sometimes the sitting version has kids crawling over him. In fact, he was an historic Zen monk who wandered from village to village with a bag of treats he gave to children. Together with the Bodhisattva Jizo, he is a patron, a protector of children in East Asian culture. Altogether an admirable figure. But he isn't a Buddha.

My Ho-tei is one of the sitting versions, rather finely detailed. At this point I had lived with him for a number of years, and over those years had become very fond of him. I found I liked to sit out in the yard with him and contemplate the bugs and birds. His weight had become a household joke in a family that has moved a great deal over the last few years. I frequently would say we will probably still be hauling

him around when Jan and I retire to the Winnebago. At this point I realized this wasn't very likely. Sure, I knew I would try to patch him up. But, I more than suspected his fate had already been written.

It was a small disappointment. I can't call it a broken heart, but certainly a bruise. I felt the loss of something I'd come to be familiar with and fond of, and with which I associate many memories. Then, as I was pouring charcoal into the Weber, I found myself thinking of something Achaan Chah Subato, the great Theravandan meditation master once said about broken glasses. I have it framed and hanging on a wall in my office:

"One day some people came to the master and asked 'How can you be happy in a world of such impermanence, where you cannot protect your loved ones from harm, illness and death?' The master held up a glass and said 'Someone gave me this glass, and I really like this glass. It holds my water admirably and it glistens in the sunlight. I touch it and it rings! One day the wind may blow it off the shelf, or my elbow may knock it from the table. I know this glass is already broken, so I enjoy it incredibly.'"

This was a season when a number of people I know and care about had lost loved ones. Always it is complicated. In a very few cases the death had been what can be called "good." There was enough time to draw affairs to a close and to communicate messages to those who needed them. And when the time came loved ones were there. Other times this wasn't the case. Totally unexpected loss--accidents or blindingly quick illnesses. Sometimes these deaths were marked with feelings of bitterness and regret that will never be addressed with any satisfaction.

And so, in that bright late-Fall afternoon, that season preceding many months of cold dreariness --I found myself thinking about loss, and how precious and precarious all things are. This is true of glasses, and concrete statues, of pets, of lovers and spouses, of parents and children and friends. It is very hard to just enjoy it all incredibly.

But, as we all consider the many Autumns of our lives, the transitional seasons between fertility and rest: I hope we will take a good look at the passing-ness of things, the precious fragility of everything. A single blade of grass, a much loved coffee mug, a fading photograph, a quick kiss; all speak of the wonder and transitoriness of life-and-death within the interdependent web. There is beauty and wonder in this existence. And as hard as it can be to face, the simple truth is this very moment is the only place we will find life and love and meaning.

I think of this and realize it is time to kiss a child, to pack a lunch and take a walk, to have that conversation I've been putting off. Perhaps we all should take the opportunity to do some such thing. We are about to enter the cold months of Winter, but we still have today -- a day that may not be perfect by our summertime standards, but that will be a miracle to us six months from now.

As we go out into the world, with our human hope and exuberance bursting from deep within us, I hope we pause to remember that the glass really is already broken. This pause is important--it awakens us. Now such a pause should not awaken us to despair or hopelessness; it is an invitation, a call to enjoy it incredibly! Our appreciation of even the smallest things in our lives is the very majesty and magic of our human existence. We must hold everything lightly, for everything passes. But, and I really believe this, such a holding is enough--when we give it our whole hearts, our full attention.

**♪ Interlude ♪**

Our second essay this morning continues to explore the Buddhist ideas of change and impermanence by introducing the idea of transitions. I couldn't find the author, but it is based on a sermon delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Salem, Oregon in October of 2016 – Welcoming the Constancy of Change:

>>>All around us, right here in this room, we see evidence of change. During Joys and Concerns, we often kindle candles of joy or sorrow, for example. Some of the milestones that are honored might be long-anticipated; some might come out of left field, totally unexpected; some are wished-for, some unwanted. And, as we honor with our final candle each week, not all of those causes for recognition are spoken aloud; some are held precious in our hearts.

No matter how much we might expect it, change is so often hard to welcome. Like the main character in J.D. Salinger's classic novel, *Catcher in the Rye*, we'd like to imagine that bits of our lives would remain constant, like museum exhibits. As Holden Caulfield says, "Certain things, they should stay the way they are. You ought to be able to stick them in one of those big glass cases and just leave them alone."

And yet, change is indeed a constant in life. The poet Octavia Butler wrote: All that you touch/You Change/ All that you Change/ Changes you. The only lasting truth/ is Change.

This is a lesson of Buddhist philosophy: life is impermanent. We are ever-moving creatures, challenged not only by the tough transitions, but by the every-day; for we are always starting anew, never in complete equilibrium for long, in spite of a natural tendency to seek stability.

The process theologian Alfred North Whitehead taught that everything in the universe is in motion, constantly creating something new. On the one hand, that knowledge can be comforting – no matter what has come before, there's always another chance to start afresh. On the other, the instability brought about by constant change can be overwhelming – new careers, new relationships, and new opportunities also means letting go of what we held on to so tightly in the past.

Change and Transition. We tend to think of these as two interchangeable words, but there is a difference. According to William Bridges, an organizational consultant:

Change is situational. Change is your move to a new city or your shift to a new job. It is the birth of your new baby or the death of your father. It is the switch from the old health plan at work to the new one.... Transition, on the other hand, is psychological. It is not those events, but rather, the inner-reorientation and self-definition that you have to go through in order to incorporate any of those changes in your life."

Without a transition, a change is just a rearrangement of furniture.

The way I understand this, transition is the in-between, the standing-on-the-threshold, adjustment time in our changing lives.

So, like the title of a book by Robert Holden, *Shift Happens!* Changes in life occur as a matter of course; it's an obvious fact. But accepting that change is part of life is not the same as welcoming the constancy of change. To welcome change as inevitable, means embracing the possibilities of fulfillment. It means appreciating not only the present, but the potential that life offers in the future, whatever that future might hold; as a song in our hymnal encourages us, to "trust the dawning future."

And, in fact, we live in constant expectation of that dawn. We don't need to demand it; it will arrive, that's guaranteed. It's also true that "the dawn may look quite different from the story we tell ourselves about it..." The trick is to remain open to the possibility of growth in any and all circumstances, without holding too tightly to what shape that growth may take.

Looking back through our lives, we can all identify many times when life took us in a direction different from what we were expecting. While in the midst of such change, it's difficult to reconcile what we hoped for against what we got. But standing here today, in all of our perfect imperfectness, we are exactly where we needed to be – and we wouldn't be here if things had gone any differently.

The Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams advised that, rather than cringing in despair, we should cast off fear and allow ourselves "to respond in hope to the light that has shone and that still shines in the darkness."

Our faith tradition encourages us to trust in that hope, to be bolstered by it, in spite of the tension created by uncertainty and ambiguity. We can draw strength from a certainty that the universe is not out to get us, in spite of what may feel like evidence to the contrary; and we can draw strength as well from our companions on the journey. When we acknowledge in community the changes we're experiencing, as we do during Joys and Concerns, we're giving other people a chance to accompany us.

Sometimes all we really need when we're feeling a sense of panic or loss of control is the knowledge that we are not alone. And that, is what we do, here, in community.

Honoring transitions eases the impact of sudden change – provides a welcoming aura – whether it is through rituals like lighting candles, rites of passage like child dedications or memorial services, or natural observations like the equinox. It's a way to formally let go of one chapter in life and make room for the next.

The book of Ecclesiastes in the Hebrew scriptures reminds us of the wheel of change that is life, in a passage that is often-cited in rites of passage rituals and that was the inspiration for Pete Seeger's song, Turn Turn Turn, that began our service this morning.

My life, just like everyone's, has been full of ups and downs and changes in direction many times over the years. At times, I have identified with the Facebook that says – "Dear Whatever-doesn't-kill-me, I'm strong enough now, thank you."

And yet, I'm convinced that it's possible to welcome the constancy of change, despite the challenge it often presents. I remind myself that as long as I'm alive, I will always have another chance to reach whatever goal I'm striving for.

Change is always in the air, in each of our personal lives, in the life of this congregation, in this country, and in the world. Each and every day, we cross over thresholds, passing from one place of being into another. It is always thus, and always will be part of the dance that is life. May we respond with a resounding "Yes!"

### **TFAA / Article II**

And speaking of change, we've been experimenting with moving some elements of our service around to give more time to our youth for their Religious Exploration. Well, today they didn't have RE, but I still

moved some things around to help with the flow of some of the various elements. You see, in addition to the weather outside, the other reason Change has been on my mind is because Unitarian Universalism is going through a bit of change right now as well.

A few months ago, I presented a service on some recommended changes to Article II of the Unitarian Universalist Associations by-laws. And without wanting to go into all the details again, so, if you are interested, that service is available on our website to listen to. But, today I wanted to share some updates that have happened since March.

And, to introduce that, I wanted to ask the youth to help with identifying some objects. You see, when I was thinking about Change, I realized that in my lifetime, I've seen a lot of changes related to technology. So, I'm going to put some images on the screen to see if the youth can identify what they are:

(for each, the technology changed but something important stayed the same...what was it?)

- 45 RPM, 8-Track Tape, Cassette, ipod, Spotify
- Film Reel, VHS, DVD, Netflix
- Punch card, Floppy Disk, Zip Disk, Thumb Drive

As you may have noticed, even though the technology has changed over the years, the purpose of the things remained the same. It's similar to our UU faith. How many of you know, or are aware of, our **Seven Principles**? Our Principles represent the ideas that we, as UUs, stand behind and promote. Did you know that we've been using our Seven Principles as our "technology" for over 30 years. When they were written, things like mobile phones, the internet, and other things we take for granted every day were just science fiction.

And so, a couple years ago, a group of UUs were asked to review the technology to make sure it's still delivering what we need it to do – and, after asking a lot of questions and considering a lot of different viewpoints, they found that an upgrade was needed.

So, at the UU General Assembly this past June, they recommended replacing the Seven Principles with **Seven Values**: Pluralism, Interdependence, Equity, Transformation, Justice, and Generosity – all surrounding our core tenet of Love.

And now that these Seven Values have been recommended, it's up to all of us, the UU churches and their members, to figure out how this upgrade works and feels for us. There's a lot to consider – and for many, change can be hard and uncomfortable.

While many of you grew up with touchscreens and texting, it took a lot of us older folks a while to adjust - some of us are still more comfortable calling and talking to a live person versus texting – but we're getting better. So accepting changes to the Seven Principles can be scary and hard and even a little bit sad. But, as long as we remain committed to the core needs that the "technology" addresses, our faith can change as often as we need it to, always moving forward together in love.

Now, if anyone here would like some additional information on Article II or how you can share your thoughts before the final vote on the changes is held at next summer's General Assembly, please feel free to talk to me during Fellowship Hour!