

Celebrating Change: Holding More  
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September at Unity. A time of comings and goings. For those of you who are new to Unity, I am the Rev Karen Gustafson and today marks the end of my one-year tenure as Unity's Interim Minister of Congregational Care. The Rev Lara Cowtan now ably occupies this position which was ably staffed under other titles by a string of other ministers who have supported the caring ministry of Unity Church in a variety of ways for many decades.

Today also marks for me the beginning of my fourth and final retirement from Parish Ministry. If you count my internship here at Unity Church in the summer and fall of 1984 and don't subtract the three years of my previous nominal retirement, I have been employed by UU congregations for 39 years, just under half of my life. I have had my eye on "my best used by" date for a while and have some other uses before I expire.

A week or so ago, someone asked me what I would be speaking about today and I said the title of my sermon would be "Celebrating Change: Learning to Hold More".

"Celebrating change," my friend said. "What an interesting idea -celebrating change."

“Yes,” I said, “I have been reflecting for a long time on the ways we talk about change – almost as though it is a necessary evil, a necessity that occurs when one fails to maintain stasis – as though the gold standard is somehow achieving stability, consistency, dependability, finding the sweet spot and then holding onto it for dear life. We like variety, yes, but after an adventure or travel or challenge or loss or pandemic we want things to return to “normal” , that mythical solid state where we can relax into the familiar and remain until something causes system failure with the imposition of change. In this narrative, change seems to equate to the failure of stability. Maybe “celebration” is too much to ask. Maybe I really ought to consider a narrative in which we normalize change and find space to hold and embrace and maybe even leverage the complexity of our responses.”

In her wonderful book, Trusting Change: Finding Our Way through Personal and Global Transformation, Karen Hering, Unity’s previous Interim Minister of Congregational Care, writes:

“if we have been lucky enough to know some stability and structure, at some point we too will discover that, whether suddenly or slowly, what we thought was solid and dependable can dissolve into a shapeless disarray like the goo inside a chrysalis. It might begin in disbelief as we stand with an unexpected pink slip in hand. Or we might feel like the loss of solid ground beneath our feet

when an important relationship comes to an end -or even when a new one begins. Or it could be a dizzying turn of perspective as an unfamiliar voice on the phone delivers heart stopping news, maybe of cancer may be of cure perhaps of a prized award we have long wanted or a failure we have long feared. Whether long term or suddenly occurring the experience of being awash in chaos, adrift in the state of goo is more typical of everyday life than we might want to believe.”

So what would it take to believe in the life giving reality of “goo”, as Karen calls it and why does it matter?

Well, one reason it matters is that the energy we put into resisting the inevitable is energy, well, wasted. Change is at base “natural”. Seasons and weather and aging and decay and growth and loss and death and renewal are natural and built into everything and every moment of every day.

Civilization, religion, institutions of all kinds are by design created to subdue and direct and control nature or at least moderate its impact. Part of what has turned many of us here away from some of the most basic concepts of traditional faiths is the grounding belief in the dominion of humans over nature. And yet we participate both willingly, consciously and unconsciously in a institutional cultures that do just that.

What I want you to hear, here, is not a diatribe or a judgment. This is not political or apocalyptic. This is an

observation about a particular cultural relationship to change which is its own kind of energy crisis. It takes energy to resist and control the power of nature and be prepared for every possible contingency that interferes with the illusion of stability.

If we were to regard change as inevitable, natural, ever present, generative, an ever available opportunity for grief and gratitude; by nature uncomfortable and challenging and lean into that reality with curiosity and resourcefulness as a kind of NORMAL, what kind of energy and creativity might THAT release?

As I age, I have found myself approaching change more and more in this way. I sometimes muse about how much more energy I have when I am not, for example, obsessing about the weather. I have been known to watch the news at both six and ten to check to see if the weather forecast has changed in the last four hours. What I know is that the weather doesn't care. It changes all the time and it is indifferent to my needs or concerns. What I know is that over the course of a lifetime when I view changing weather as a teacher instead of a foe I am vastly more capable of dealing with the uncontrollable and unexpected changes. I keep a shovel and kitty litter and a triple A card and a blanket in the car in the winter and a raincoat and an umbrella in the summer and I stay inside if I can when the weather is harsh. If I forget those things I get wet or cold and then I get warm and dry. And, more recently, I have been doing

what I can, with new energy, to cultivate resilience, (being cheerful even when weather forces a change in plans) and to practice gratitude, (I love flowers and flowers need rain) acceptance (it's just weather) resourcefulness (maybe we can move the party into the garage) and adaptability. AND I am acutely aware of how much time and energy civilized people spend talking about the inconvenience of needing to deal with weather.

Gratitude, acceptance, resourcefulness and adaptability.

These practices are, I think, a good place to begin to normalize change. These feelings and practices ask of us to expand the range and complexity of responses to our experience of change.

There are other places, other feelings and practices of course and we find them when we must.

I think about categories of change to which our cultural narrative attaches value and particularly limiting sets of emotional responses . Marriage, divorce, pregnancy, death, graduations, birthdays that end in 0 or 5. These are particular clusters of changes that we categorize as positive or negative and respond to with a set of phrases that often lead to a limited narrative, a suppressing of the range of feelings that accompany these changes. If you have ever browsed the greeting card aisles at Walgreens you know what I mean. Perhaps you have tried to find just the right cards in the "Sympathy" section

for a family member who has just experienced the death of a child to car accident , and another for the family of a 97 year old whose stroke has left her unresponsive in a care facility for the last five years, and found only rows after row of cards that say some form of “I’m sorry for your loss”. This is a sentiment that hardly captures the complexity of the change which is death. I wonder how these canned and culturally endorsed responses inherently limit our capacity to live in the layers around this inevitable change.

In the year my ministry has been with you, I have had occasions to hold space for some of you in the face of changes, life transitions, painful, sometimes devastating. The story that I have found most helpful which I shared with some of you, is the story found in a book entitled “Proverbs of Ashes : Violence, Redemptive Suffering and the Search for What Saves us by Rita Nakashema Brock and Rebecca Parker. Rebecca Parker was the President of the Starr King School for the Ministry, our Unitarian Universalist Seminary in Berkeley. In this book she shares her own story .

She was working as a Methodist Minister in a church in Puget Sound Washington. Married, she had become pregnant. Her husband was not ready for parenthood and so she submitted to an illegal abortion which rendered her Infertile. A few months later, he left her. All stability lost she struggled for months to regain her sense of meaning and selfhood. One night she lost he

will to live. Late one night she resolved to walk into the waters of Lake Union and let the water take. As she approached the dune above the lake she saw what appeared to be a row of saw horses and some moving figures. As she drew near she saw that the sawhorse were telescopes and that the figures were members of the Seattle astronomy club. She writes:

“Before I could make my way through the line, one of them looked up from his eyeglass, and presuming me to be an astronomer, said with enthusiasm, ‘I've got it, focused perfectly on Jupiter. Come, take a look.’

I didn't want to be rude or give away my reason for being there, so I bent down and looked through the telescope. There was Jupiter, banded and glowing.

‘Isn't it great?’ he said.

It was great. Jupiter was beautiful through the telescope. The amateur astronomer focusing the lens, didn't know me. He didn't know why I was there. He assumed I was there because the night sky was a wonder to behold. Across the sheen of dark water, the lights of the city shimmered. Overhead, the sky was wild with pinpoints of fire.

I couldn't kill myself in the presence of these people who had gotten up in the middle of a cold spring night with their home built RadioShack telescopes to look at the planets and the stars.

It would be wrong to think of this moment, as one in which joy triumphed over despair, or love of life defeated the desire for death. Such a view assumes that bad feelings need to be excised or suppressed by stronger, better feelings. Peace or happiness, or even survival, are imagined to be accomplished by cutting something out. What happened instead was that my heart opened to hold more.”

For myself, cultivating the capacity to open my heart to hold more, has helped me to normalize change. I came here to this interim ministry at Unity with a fixed ending, open to the knowing that I would offer my love and care and that we, in turn might all be changed, as the song says, “for good”. And perhaps without really knowing what was happening, the heart of Unity Church has been opened in this way as well by all of the many changes we have faced and embraced in the recent past.

After many years of institutional stability made possible by a 21 year ministry, Unity experienced a series of unwelcomed changes beginning with the retirement of Rob and Janne Eller-Isaacs delayed by the pandemic, the pandemic itself; the illness and subsequent death of Rob Eller Isaacs, the departures of two beloved associate ministers, Rev Lisa Friedman and Karen Hering, a ministerial search that ended without a settled candidate; the hiring of Rev Kathleen as Interim Senior and me for Congregational care with the guarantee that



we would each be here for the short term. I am leaving now and Kathleen will be leaving in the spring. And there will be another settled minister.

The normal changes that are at Unity's center have held and will hold, perhaps in more creative and complex ways. Babies and children will be dedicated and teens will come of age. And marriages and Christmas Pagaments. and death will happen and those lives will be celebrated. There will be Wellspring Wednesdays and multicultural education and music and worship and comings and goings and grief and gratitude. There will be disappointments and recoverings and through it all, if you can lean into this complexity as normal and natural and persistent, with curiosity and attention to what is emerging out of the goo, there will be new beginnings without end.

Gratitude, acceptance, resourcefulness and adaptability. These feelings and practices ask of us to expand the range and complexity of responses to our experience of change, to open our hearts to hold more. This means that those other feelings of loss and grief and longing for more are to be expected and absorbed and serve to inform the future as well as the present. And this I know:

Ministerial transition is a reality in every congregation. These changes are, for better and for worse, a norm in congregational life. Every minister, without exception, comes with the intention of offering the best we have in

the service of this faith as we understand it. We are all imperfectly gifted and when we leave we leave with you our imperfect gifts to use as you will to strengthen the core of the congregation which has always been yours. At best shared ministry is yours to share with your ministers, not the other way around.

I am so grateful to have been afforded this opportunity to come full circle, to return with some well honed love and wisdom and then enter into the days ahead with gratitude and confidence in the continuing power and beauty of this beloved community.

We, you, I, must live in the layers. We are not done with our changes.