

Fire of Commitment: Life Transitions

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Today, we've heard stories about various animals facing changes and transitions in their lives – A Duck at the Door and Micaela's story of the menagerie on the Ark. But four footeds are not the only animals who face life changes and surprises. It happens to all of us, and these stories remind us that things change all of the time.

We are always in transition between what was and what will be. Technology and knowledge. Progress and expansion. Repurposing and retrofitting. It's always something. Despite a yearning for predictability, security, and the comfort of the usual, there's always something changing in life. Things are never the same, never as they were just the instant before. Today, I'd like to explore the nature of our very human and natural responses to the transitions of our life, both those we choose and those we don't.

I hope some of you are familiar with comedienne Gilda Radner's famous character, Roseanne Rosannadanna, who was a staple of Saturday Night Live in the 1970's. Roseanne would begin a rambling monologue about a topic, only to resolve her thoughts by saying, "It just goes to show you, it's always something..." For this character, "it's always something" was a way of explaining life's inexplicable nuances and circumstances. Radner, who died of ovarian cancer in 1989, wrote in her autobiography (titled **It's Always Something**), that "I wanted a perfect ending. Now I've learned the hard way, that some poems don't rhyme, and some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next." I think her words on coping with the changing nature of life hold wisdom for us.

Change is a theme of our lives, both personally and collectively. We are not the same today as we were 15 years, 10 days, or even five minutes ago. Our growth and development as humans, our vitality, relies on making changes over time, continuing to explore and question and move into new territory intellectually, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. We have to develop our skill at making transitions. As Unitarian Universalists, we acknowledge this striving for growth in our commitment to accept and encourage one another in this process, and in our free and responsible search for individual truth and meaning.

As groups of people, we have a history of moving through change, as well. History does record periods of relative stasis, like the years we refer to as the "dark ages," but there are more periods of great change and upheaval, such as the era of the Protestant Reformation. In modern times, we know we live in a period of rapid and increasing change, with things moving faster and with more complexity than any of us could have ever imagined would be possible.

I was fortunate to grow up with my great-grandmother in my life. She was born in 1893, and lived to be 96. One of my favorite conversations with her was to talk about all of the changes she'd experienced and the history she had witnessed through her life. From transportation to communication, from education to race relations to social norms, not much had gone unchanged during her lifetime. She, like all of us, had experienced an incredible amount of transition, many beginnings and endings.

And, we have impressions, feelings, and reactions to all of that change. When change is something we see as desirable, we take up the banner of the cause and charge forward with our ideas. We want to implement change, push change, drive change, lead change, champion change, or be change agents. Some of us love the new and innovative. Some of us are quite comfortable with innovation and continually look for ways to mix things up, move things around, and change the landscape of our lives.

On the other hand, when we don't see change as something we're in favor of, then we want to avoid change, resist change, stop change, or at least put a serious damper on the march of "progress." President Woodrow Wilson said that "if you want to make enemies, try changing something." Some of us make changes only when we have a clear idea of the outcomes to be achieved, we create a defined plan for how to get there, and we see the benefit of moving in a new direction. After all, it ain't broke, don't fix it.

William Bridges, author and "patron saint" of change and transition for the last 25 years, tells us that all of life's changes, whether personal or collective, start with an ending. Something happens that marks the shift from how things were to how things will be. It can be a small occurrence – a broken dish, a flat tire – or it can be a big one – the loss of a job, the death of a loved one. A change event ends what was and influences the choices and decisions we make as we move forward into a new reality.

After we begin the change process with an ending, we move into a period that Bridges calls the "neutral zone" – that time when we are unsure of what's happening or what will happen. This time of transition may be short, as little as a few seconds, or it may last for years. It depends on the event and it depends on our own ability to cope with the ambiguity that results from the change in our lives. Writer Marilyn Ferguson has said, "It's not so much that we're afraid of change or so in love with the old ways, but it's that place in between that we fear...It's like being between trapezes. It's Linus when his blanket is in the dryer. There's nothing to hold on to."

In the neutral zone, our human inclination is to demand answers and structures and plans and promises. Just hanging out in the neutral zone can be stressful. If the uncertainty and ambiguity last too long, we start looking for ways to relieve the tension of not knowing what's going to happen. We can be so uncomfortable with the unknowing that we make a decision, ANY decision – even a wrong one – for the simple relief of knowing that something is decided and determined and certain once again.

Certainly the element of choice in facing life's circumstances can make a huge difference in whether we see a pending change as a good thing (in other words, it was our idea or we like the suggestion) or not (in other words, it was somebody else's idea and we don't agree with it.) When we face a personal change, we often have more control over the choices involved. It is up to us to make the decision and we can follow the direction we feel is best for us.

When we participate in groups – like a congregation or a democracy – decisions get made through votes or discussions or other strategies that may or may not result in an outcome that we personally endorse or approve. Just like individuals, groups that desire to remain vibrant and alive have to make decisions that support their growth and those decisions can create change. Whether it's letting in new ideas, or new people, or new locations, or new ways of doing things, life calls out for change.

Not only can this be a personal challenge, it is a challenge facing many "institutions," including this religious denomination. How do we remain true to our

traditions, AND adapt to meet the needs of the next generation? How do we navigate the challenge of change? There are no easy answers to these questions. It's a process of discernment and experimentation and finding ways to be open to opportunity.

Someone once said that we don't resist change, we resist being changed. Change is great – just make sure it happens to someone else, because we're just fine the way we are, thank you very much! Writer Anais Nin tells us that "Life is a process of becoming, a combination of states we have to go through. Where people fail is that they wish to elect a state and remain in it. This is a kind of death." Yet, changes that ask us to modify our perceptions of ourselves seem to be life's hardest. Sometimes we cling so tightly to our self identification that it's almost impossible for us to let go, even if what we're choosing for ourselves is not, in fact, good for us in the long run.

However, new ideas, new information, new people – all of these may require that we see ourselves through different lenses, think about ourselves in new ways, and consider alternatives that we never considered before. In our commitment as Unitarian Universalists, we've already said that we want to engage in the world and be a part of society at large. As UU's, we've put ourselves in the path of change. In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, life is a progress, not a station. Because we don't demand the adoption of a creedal standard, we've made a stand for continuing revelation and changing spiritual interpretations. It's not always easy, but it's our commitment as a faithful people. It is the fire of OUR commitment.

And we always do have a choice in changing situations, either in how we choose to act or in how we choose to react. This is where we have control, even though we may not feel we're in control of the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Our control comes from the choices we make in dealing with the situations of our lives. Our influence is primarily over ourselves as we make the choices that support life, growth, community, truth – any of the things we value.

Now, if the changes in our lives only happened one at a time, we might be able to handle these endings and uncertainties with a certain flair and confidence. However, changes seldom seem to happen that way. In the world of change, it seems the motto is "the more the merrier!"

While life is complex, fast-paced, and demands our constant engagement, most of the time, not everything changes at once. We may find ourselves with numerous changes bombarding us at one time, and we can be in different phases of acting and interacting with each one, but some things will remain constant, even as we transform and move into a new phase.

Bridges' third step in the change process is the new beginning, which is actually the end of the cycle. At this point, we've made our choices and we are ready to step into the new reality, made possible by the end of the old and our learning during the period we spent in the neutral zone. The new beginning marks our acknowledgement and acceptance of those things which we cannot or will not choose to change, our commitment to make the changes that need to be made, and our wisdom in discerning the difference.

Remember that Gilda Radner told us that life is "about not knowing, about taking the moment and making the best of it."

Please understand – I'm not suggesting that tradition or security are bad things. Nor am I suggesting that we shouldn't value continuity and try to create it whenever and

wherever we can. I'm saying we should be very clear about what "security" means to us, and to find ways to feel secure and certain and whole, even in the midst of changing circumstances and life realities. The art of progress is to preserve order amid change and to preserve change amid order.

Plans have their place, by all means. I am saying that we should have a plan and plan to change our plans. The Alaskan Inuits believe the best strategy is to start the day with the understanding that there are two plans at play – one is your own personal plan for how you'll spend the day. The other is the plan the gods have for how the day will spend you.

We are courageous when we release the familiar and seemingly secure, when we embrace the new. But there is no real security in what is no longer meaningful. Remember the choices and options for control that you actually do have and use your power to work with the changes in your life.

Vibrant, growing, full and fruitful life is about change, and change has great power in it. Cycles of growth and dormancy, flowering and fading, developing and dying make up the natural world, and we are as natural as the waves, the trees, and the birds on the wing. Vitality and life depend on change. Not that all change is good, not that all change is of our choosing. But, life chooses change, and adapting insures our continued relevance in changing circumstances and shifting realities.

It's said that in his later years, Pablo Picasso could not be allowed to roam an art gallery unattended, because he had been discovered previously in the act of trying to "improve" on his old masterpieces. Perhaps he understood something about the vibrancy of life, the urgent call for transition and transformation, from which we can learn. How will you improve your "old masterpieces" this coming year? What is the fire of your commitment? These are things to keep in mind as we move forward into 2011.

Happy New Year!