

Change

Legend has it that a Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, famously told his students that “One cannot step in the same river twice.” A smart Alec responded with, “One cannot step in the same river once.” Change as a verb means to: “make (someone or something) different; alter or modify.” Change is about making something different from what it is now or would be if you left it alone. But look at those last two statements: “make (someone or something) different; alter or modify.” “Change is about making something different from what it is now or would be if you left it alone.” They both imply agency on the part of an unchanging individual altering or modifying some part of the static world. However, every second we are breaking through illusions of permanence, as we age and grow or decline, as our moods and preferences shift from moment to moment, and as the world around us also changes. I honor Buddhists for making constant change the centerpiece of their analysis of the world and people who live in it. Whatever you feel, whatever you perceive, know that it will change at any moment. Our daily struggle is to overcome stasis delusions and change deliberately, through choice and self-direction.

Suppose you were given the choice of change or die. Not just what a televangelist might propose: your eternal soul is in danger of damnation to hell; not overblown rhetoric from a motivational speaker claiming to change your miserable life. What if your doctor or psychotherapist or friend confronted you, saying you have to make difficult, permanent change in the way you think and act or you would die—sooner rather than later. Can you do it? Yes, I am actually asking you to tell me right now, can you change or will you chose to die, answer with a Yes or a No. That was pretty tepid. Yes? You are probably deluding yourself and misleading your loved ones. You probably wouldn't change, given that the odds against it are nine to one against you. And yet, that choice would seem to be an impetus for major change.

Not content to let well enough alone as a community organizer and a minister, I became a psychotherapist and a marriage and family therapist, thus devoting myself intensely to emotional and psychological change--where I and my

colleagues have apparently failed miserably. We are still in a terrible mess. I am reconciled to it, however. I do not expect that the first time I confront someone that they are abusing alcohol that they will jump with joy and run right off to do 90 AA meetings in 90 days. I do not expect that, when I first observe how someone could change that they will accept it, nor that the injured party in a marital conflict will accept any responsibility for destructive marital dynamics.

I am also interested in change for personal reasons. Years ago, a friend of mine and his wife were readying themselves to move. Now, this friend is, in addition to many fine qualities, also a hoarder so he had a lot of things to move. So, when he started to carry boxes around and found that he was more than usually short of breath, he consulted his doctor. Given that he had (during four decades) expected that he might soon die of cancer, he accepted his internist's diagnosis: "an over-exaggerated sense of doom." His doctor prescribed anti-anxiety medication and sent him home to pack. His wife called me the next day, saying they could use my help in moving as he was unable to carry even moderately heavy boxes downstairs. I agreed to help pack and carry, but I also talked with him and said I did not see his symptoms as indicative of anxiety; the next day he saw a cardiologist; three days later he had three shunts installed to open up blood vessels next to his heart. After the operation, his surgeon demanded: "You will lose weight and eat a low calorie, low cholesterol diet," and my friend followed through enough to lose 43 pounds over the next year. And yet the tide of experience was against him. As Dr. Edward Miller, once the dean of the medical school and CEO of the hospital at Johns Hopkins University, said, "If you look at people after coronary-artery bypass grafting two years later, 90% of them have not changed their lifestyle and that's been studied over and over and over again. And so we're missing some link in there. Even though they know they have a very bad disease, and they know they should change their lifestyle, for whatever reason, they can't."

My friend was married to a nurse who was all over this problem and he was unusually adept at cognitively recognizing changes he needed to make and following through. It took some grief for his former lifestyle and some backsliding

here and there, but he was able to change his diet and we went along with his changed diet when we got together.

Dr. Miller hits two crucial points there—he says that we’re missing some link between vital information and change. He is not saying these are lazy or bad people, but that people are not easily able to change.

“Change or Die” by Alan Deutschman (in the May 2005 FAST COMPANY) says that crisis is not a powerful impetus for change because change is not effectively motivated by fear but by compelling, positive visions of the future. He further suggests that radical change is most effective because it breaks rigid, pessimistic ways of thinking under the impact of felt, beneficial improvements. Radical improvements thus quickly reinforce change psychologically, emotionally and spiritually; Dean Ornish, a cardiologist, found that 77% of heart patients who received a year of twice-weekly group support sessions and training in meditation, exercise, relaxation, and yoga had maintained their lifestyle change for three years. Deutschman speaks to organizational as well as personal change when he recommends radical change reinforced by a felt perception of improvement is a change so profound the individual is partially transformed in the way they see themselves—as more powerful and effective—in a special, positive environment.

In order to focus on your fulfillment, do some values clarification exercises such as asking yourself what you truly value: what is really important to you, and maybe describe the person who is most significant to you and describe their best characteristics, what would you like written on your tombstone, etc. and then try to live out those prized characteristics. Change is through people focusing on dearly esteemed values while receiving the multifaceted support they need. Katy Butler, writing in Psychotherapy Networker (Sept./Oct. 2003) underscores the importance of “actions taken in the service of deeply held values and a broader sense of purpose.” She points out the importance of getting the social support you need, noting that some of the research on New Year’s resolutions found that people who had social support changed successfully, whether it was “an exercise buddy, class, psychoeducation group, religious institution, or self-help group.”

This is where we return to that necessary link I mentioned before, between information and behavioral change, and the ABILITY to change.

As a psychotherapist, I know that the relationship between therapist and client is the base upon which change rests; change occurs when a client feels deeply listened to, empathized with, and empowered to change through support and concern. This goes by a lot of terms: rapport, positive engagement, empathy, the working alliance, etc., but it all boils down to the same thing: a form of love. Dean Ornish built forms of social support into his cardiac change program; not because the information provided was itself the issue—that is probably already on many web sites—but because the information was effectively communicated in a supportive atmosphere. The link between information and change is the love that says to me, and to you, “This is for you. This means you. This is specific to you because I care.” For example, to return to my friend, Harry, he did move, into a community where he and his wife went to Sunday services. There he met a man whose home included a private gym and with several friends would regularly work out together at his gym, razzing, supporting, confronting, and urging each other onward to greater feats of elderly exercise derring-do.

Now, I will speak to you about FUSW as if it is a person, whole and entirely autonomous. We know it is not, in actuality, a person separate from others but a collection of people who are sometimes combined in purpose and sometimes lost in thought and other times committed to moving forward. In that sense, FUSW acts like a person struggling to change. But FUSW is going through changes that have been thrust on us as surely as a heart attack. Are we ABLE to change? That depends on our motivation and social support.

With a lot of mixed feelings of grief, sadness, resentment, and anxiety, we sold the shell that was once the home for our spiritual searching and fellowship. After Hurricane Ida ripped into our home, we responded with the committed strength and vigor that dwelling in our home had built up for us. Many people turned out to clean and throw things away; many worked long hours in the mud and stench. You were amazing.

It was an accomplishment to sell a building that suddenly changed on us. I feel grateful to those who worked hard for months to free us from what had become an unhelpful anchor. However, I didn't hear a lot of celebrating. I still don't. That is only normal—we don't yet have a place that helps us nurture each other and move ahead, excited about our future. I think some of us thought we could find a smudged carbon copy of that here at South Church.

We were very lucky to find any place, and it was delightful that South Church had a congregation that understood the need for social justice. South Church's legacy of working for peace, social equality, economic justice, and racial equality was heartening. Some of us had known the Rev. Joseph Gilmore's lyrical passion for peace, enormous energy for defying injustice, and burning desire to see the light of hope illuminate beaten-down lives. However, the many efforts by well-meaning individuals have not resulted in our having a comfortable relationship with South Church. We are simply very different in theology, expectations, and structure. South Church is Christian, so everything is filtered through that perspective. FUSW is Unitarian Universalist and offers questions and accepts a variety of viewpoints and insights from Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, nature religions, humanism, etc. as potentially valuable. South Church's sanctuary has a cross super-imposed on a picture of the broken world, but we have a chalice to guide our search for truth and meaning in the world. South Church has a hierarchy nestled within a larger hierarchy, and we convene discussion groups for participatory, democratic decisions. We had only flirted before, not actually dated, and then we moved in together. Nobody is bad in this scenario, but it is unsustainable in the long term.

Almost all of us will miss the features we cherished at 25 Old Jackson Avenue that are not going to be present at a new place. The view of nature from the back window, the easy parking, the seclusion that allowed us a chance to be present just with each other, all those may not be available. We will miss some of the features we have here: a relatively low cost, relative quiet around us, and easy coordination of social action efforts. Individually, we will have to change. We will need to savor new possibilities. We will need to appreciate how air conditioning enables us to assemble more often. We may find a more urban

setting, allowing us to participate in a kind of social action we have not allowed ourselves before. We may have intrusive sounds and urban problems of poverty, safety, and traffic congestion. This huge change from what we knew for 50 years will make us annoyed and nostalgic. We will have the opportunity to apply our principles to a more diverse environment. Last week, when Sarita and I were waiting outside the latest possible relocation site in Elmsford, we saw a slice of life pass by. There was an elderly Hispanic man apparently taking groceries home, a ragged, houseless man pushing his heaped shopping cart followed by a young Black man strutting by, waving a small American flag, a one-man Fourth of July parade.

“How are you?” he sang to me.

“I’m fine,” I replied, “How are you?”

“I’m fabulous,” he called out from down the street.

None of that would you have seen at 25 Old Jackson Avenue, nor much of it at South Church’s chapel. It will be different, wherever we end up.

We may now have a possible place for us to rent that meets most of our needs. Our New Home Committee has considered many places, maybe 50 or more, and been frustrated many times for a variety of reasons—landlords who do not want to rent to a religious congregation, local municipalities that are intransigent, very high rents, dangerous neighborhoods, etc. We are now closer than we have ever been to renting something but there are many hurdles to be cleared before the congregation can even know what it is voting on.

In sum, I am impressed that we are vital, still moving forward. Moving again is, in a quiet way, exciting, as if putting one cement block on another and mortaring them into place is exciting—exacting but fulfilling work. Helpful and necessary planning and building for the future. Once established in a home we can better advance our principles in the world. Our principles call us to search for truth and meaning, to advance justice and equity, to feed the hungry and house the poor and oppressed. Advancing our principles has not been abandoned. We

are still searching for truth and meaning; we still feed the poor and worry about the oppressed. We just need a home base that makes it more fulfilling.

The major determining factor that will help us make a move is our commitment to our principles and each other. Our values are important; it is our living them out with each other that matters. It is our acceptance of each other as sometimes quirky, eccentric, and flawed that is a major strength. The many hours people have put into the effort to a move and establishing ourselves someplace as a congregation is heartening and energizing for me. I hope it is also enlivening for you.

At this point, I would like to quote Moses from Exodus telling the ancient Israelites that it is going to be rough, but they will find a home, except that he had a speech impediment, so the Bible doesn't have his words. I would tell you that, like Moses and Martin Luther King, Jr., I have been to the mountain and I know we will find the Promised Land. Except, I have not been to any mountains, I have been to Thornwood, Chappaqua, Hastings, Greenburg, and Ardsley. I am asking you to personally and together make changes needed to accompany each other in our search for a new home. We will find something where our principles will take root and grow social justice. We will teach an accepting spirituality to little kids. We will gather to sing and share and ponder insights together. We will know it as home, again, because we will still recognize the full humanity of each other and change to grow each other into a greater truth and meaning.