

Unimagined Change
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Reading

Winter Poem
by Robert Bly

The quivering wings of the winter ant
Wait for lean winter to end.
I love you in slow, dimwitted ways,
Hardly speaking, one or two words only.

What caused us to live hidden?
A wound, the wind, a word, a parent.
Sometimes we wait in a helpless way,
Awkwardly, not whole and not healed.

When we hid the wound, we fell back
From a human to a shelled life.
Now we feel the ant's hard chest,
The carapace, the silent tongue.

This must be the way of the ant,
The winter ant, the way of those
Who are wounded and want to live;
To breathe, to sense another, and to wait.

Sermon

Do you have an adult acquaintance who behaves like a 3-year-old? Someone at your workplace? Or possibly in your family? Yes, there's an unfortunate supply of people who are aggressive, entitled, controlling, or shy underachievers.

This is a poem that Robert Bly wrote about the fearful toddler inside many of us:

"One Source of Bad Information" (from *Eating the Honey of Words*, p. 236)

There's a boy in you about three
Years old who hasn't learned a thing for thirty Thousand years. Sometimes it's a girl.
This child had to make up its mind
How to save you from death. He said things like:
"Stay home. Avoid elevators. Eat only elk."

You live with this child, but you don't know it.
You're in the office, yes, but live with this boy At night. He's uninformed, but he does want

To save your life. And he has. Because of this boy You survived a lot. He's got six big ideas.
Five don't work. Right now he's repeating them to you.

This is how I was. The shy underachiever. For decades, I clung to the five ideas that don't work because they did help me to survive as a boy.
And I carried these beliefs into adulthood. I carried them for over 50 years.

Unfortunately, young children are hard-wired not to blame their parents for bad parenting: instead, we blame ourselves because it is intolerable, can even be psychosis-inducing, for kids to think that their parents are bad. I had to be desperate to look for the sixth idea, the one that might work.

To carry Bly's poem a step forward: we can heal if we listen, with professional assistance, to our interior three-year old, to develop a dialogue with him or her, to understand our life-long need to protect the status quo. We can discover that we're safe now, we are competent adults; it's o.k. to drop the no-longer needed protections which now limit and hurt our adult lives.

My last career was as a psychotherapist. One of my psychotherapy teachers, a wonderfully warm, kind former Catholic priest, said that every personal psychotherapy ends up being a kind of spiritual quest.

For me, this was true: as I learned to change, to love myself, I could feel, and love, the divine in everyone -- well, almost everyone -- and feel the wonder of our Earth. We are indeed miracles in a miraculous universe.

In my adult life, I've divorced twice after long-term marriages. These were hard experiences, but at the time they happened, I thought I knew why. I couldn't have verbalised it, but what I knew down deep was that I was defective. I felt "hollow" all of the time.

W. H. Auden has written of this kind of neediness, for that's what it is:

For the error bred in the bone
Of each woman and each man
Craves what it cannot have,
Not universal love
But to be loved alone.

(W. H. Auden, "September 1, 1939")

From early childhood, I knew that I wasn't lovable, but needed to find love. I didn't understand then that this interior void could be filled by only one person's love, and that was my own. Erich Fromm has said:
"Eventually, the mature person has to come to the point where he is his own mother and his own father." (The Art of Loving) Once we pass through childhood, few can do this without skilled help.

I also had a poor relationship with work. Because I didn't know who I was or what I wanted, I didn't choose a career so much as fell into one by default. And, especially when I was younger, it was easy to turn my bosses into disapproving parents. When I worked hard, it wasn't with joy, it was out of fear of disapproval, fear that my inadequacies would be noticed.

As a result of heavy workloads and poor relationships with superiors, I would come to feel resentful. Once, at age 31, I was fired, confirming my worst fears about myself. (Bear with me -- this does have a happy ending!)

But the school of life presents us with the same problems until we solve them. The second impending marriage failure at age 55 shook me to my foundations. Children were involved.

About 18 months before separation, I began seven years of psychoanalysis. It took many years because I could be vulnerable only in an atmosphere of trust: I had to trust the analyst; he had to earn my trust, and I also had to learn to trust myself, so I could dare look inside.

It's an ironic fact that most of us avoid at all costs looking at the contents of our own subconscious. But gradually I began to understand the roots of my low self-esteem and poorly understood emotions. Joining a men's group also helped.

Eventually, I felt tremendous peace and gratitude, so much so that I wanted to help others and studied to become a psychotherapist myself.

But why did I wait until my fifties to do this work?

Here is one insight: U.S. historian Daniel Boorstin has said: "The greatest obstacle to discovery is not ignorance -- it is the illusion of knowledge."

So, it is extremely difficult for us to imagine, let alone embrace, ideas such as self-love that are outside of our experience.

Therefore, psychotherapy has nothing to do with willpower, except a willingness to keep appointments with the analyst: how could I have "willed" myself into a peaceful place that I had no conception of?

Studies in psychotherapy helped me to understand that, although we may continue to develop intellectually all our lives, emotional patterns are set by the age of five or six. They rarely change without psychotherapy; they feel immutable.

Because as a young boy, I was punished with disapproval and withdrawal of love, I lost the opportunity to know that I was a wondrous child. (Indeed, we are all, all wondrous children.)

Unfortunately, I learned not to trust the world. I became shy, conforming, and especially with my parents, a sometimes sneaky underachiever.

The changes to my brain were actually physical: all children have the possibility of what is called "synaptic exuberance," a tremendous expansion of connections in the brain, until age four or five.

In my case, instead of expansion, the connections allowing me to feel lovable and joyous got pruned early on; they withered; instead, connections facilitating low self-esteem were reinforced. Once established in childhood, my emotional patterns were fixed for decades. Locked in as I was, a scared, angry three-year-old, change was impossible for most of my life.

Let's now expand our view to examine change in interpersonal relationships. Friendships, intimate relationships, workplaces, and Unitarian congregations face challenges similar to those I've just talked about.

For a moment, think about corporations that have failed to notice and adapt to a changing business environment: nothing in their experiences allowed them to foresee disaster ahead.

Contemplate the GM of a year ago, for example, as a psychiatric patient: what is your diagnosis, doctor? As the rap song says: "De-Nile ain't just a river in Africa." Or, we could note one of Murphy's laws: "The ears have walls."

And if it's hard for us as individuals to embrace new ideas, how much more difficult it is for a giant corporation with thousands of managerial ego-defenses.

Change is also inevitable, and equally arduous, for religious communities.

The growth of fundamentalist religion, I think, can be explained at least in part as a reaction to the tremendous pace of change in the world: some people are extremely fearful; they trade intellectual freedom for the security of a rigid belief system, need to feel safe at, in my opinion, a high price.

I once sat on a committee that tried to save a United Church wherein the average members' age was about sixty. I didn't understand that it was already too late to save this church, but even so, suggestions for possible changes were resisted by many.

Our spiritual home, First Unitarian of Toronto, is a highly-emotionally charged home for us. It is a place where we have loved and been loved, allowed ourselves to feel vulnerable, raised children, married, or buried family members. Familiar things here are comforting and provide continuity.

In a life where very little seems not to change, and so much is outside our control, the urge to defend familiar things can be powerful: for example, children who have been abused by parents may not want to leave them -- for what is an unknown future. So we are hard-wired to prefer the known, even a difficult "known."

Buddhists, who see life not as a linear progression but as a wheel, may do a better job than most of us in understanding and accepting the impermanence of everything.

But our congregation does change constantly. As the chant says: "She changes everything she touches, and everything she touches changes."

Changes to the Sunday service, to staff members, to our governing structure, or to the building itself, can feel threatening. Author Ronald Heifetz has said "What people resist is not change, per se, but loss." (Leadership on the Line) So when I want, or don't want, a particular change, it is easy for me to feel the change as a loss.

As we consider the inevitability of change, there are risks. If we move too quickly, we may have to live with hastily made decisions, or risk alienating members who haven't bought into the process, or worse, haven't been brought into the process. If we move too slowly, and perhaps this is a particular risk for mainstream denominations, we risk a possible decrease in vitality: a non-decision becomes a decision by default. As Thoreau said: "A man sits as many risks as he runs." (Walden)

To thrive, we need to be informed and alert to what's happening inside and outside of our congregation.

Based on my limited experience, we do a lot of looking, studying, talking, and evaluating, which are important. There are challenges: the greying of our membership, how much green space we can have at the front of the building, stresses on RE space, providing sanctuary, and a move to a new building or renovating this one. It's important that discussions about change continue to be conducted in open, mature environments where trust has been achieved, (this does not include e-mail), so that everyone feels listened to and respected, which brings me to my final point: peace.

Each Sunday in our Congregational Covenant we say "To Dwell Together in Peace." I'm sorry to report that peace is a desirable way-station where we may rest for a time, but it's not a secure dwelling place. Periodic conflict is normal, inevitable, and even healthy when it's done right.

When I hear stories about people who've been married for 25 years and never argued, I wonder about the veracity of that, but, at the least, they are missing out on a deeper, more loving connection that comes after a fair marital fight, one where both sides listen, speak their feelings, and avoid blame.

E-motion is meant to be "energy in motion." A person who can't listen, who hangs on to anger or other negative feelings, will have hard times.

In order to listen deeply and fight fairly, there must be mutual trust.

Trust given too soon is naive. Trust withheld too long indicates fear and maybe dishonesty. And, as stated earlier, it must be earned as well as given.

Years ago, I was a member of a social group that got together for weekends several times a year. It was a seemingly cohesive group until a major problem arose, one that we were unable to resolve, and the group never recovered.

For years, the group had appeared cohesive because, for the weekends, everyone was on best behaviour. Unresolved irritations could be papered over, because togetherness was brief. This is what author Scott Peck, writing in *A Different Drum*, calls "Pseudo-community." (*The Different Drum*, M. Scott Peck, M.D.) Pseudo-community involves avoidance.

Authentic, deep community is achieved only after dialogue, often painful, where people listen and avoid blaming. "It can't be cheaply bought," says Peck. No one looks for conflict, of course, but it finds all of us.

So, "To dwell together in peace (most of the time)" for a congregation requires, I believe, what's needed for a loving couple: listening deeply, and taking responsibility for our own feelings of frustration and anger.

This morning I've compressed a lot of years, a lot of experiences, into a few minutes. What I'd like to leave you with is that many of us, with help, can find our way out of limited, difficult lives, and that what we learn for our own benefit will help in all areas of our lives: intimate, business, and spiritual. We can indeed "feast on our lives." May it be so.