

“What, Me, Change?”

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N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

I would never be able to do that. It's just not in my DNA.
What, me, change?

I'm never going to be able to get along with that person.
We're simply incompatible. What, me, change?

No matter what I do, I just can't get free of this problem.
What, me, change?

Life continually presents us with experiences that are
difficult to handle.

Events that are unpleasant,
other people who challenge us,
and parts of ourselves we'd like to change.

We often respond in ways that are,
well, somewhat predictable.

We might try to avoid something...
alter the situation in some way...
or banish the things we don't like.

And, let's be honest, there are many.

No matter who we are, there's probably no shortage of things we'd like to change about our lives.

If one thing happens to change for the better, a new thing we'd like to change crops up!

Just when we get used to the way something is, it changes, causing us no end of difficulty.

A relationship ends, or a job changes, or we lose some ability we once had.

Our instinct is often to resist those changes...
to judge them negatively...
to see them as somehow threatening to ourselves.

It's a natural response:

To believe, on some level,
that we're not capable of
growing into that new challenge.

Growing into the ability to
live with it.

What, me, change?

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Life, of course, teaches us otherwise.

From the moment of our birth, we're confronted with change that's destined to transform us—and it's not pretty.

The baby crying in profound discomfort upon being forced to leave the womb. That's one vivid example.

As are the changes that come in puberty, menopause, aging...the list goes on.

And we see examples in nature: the snake completely shedding its own skin...

Or the caterpillar utterly losing almost every aspect of its outward identity, in order to be transformed into a glorious butterfly.

What, me, change? We can identify!

But, of course, as human beings who often think of ourselves as quite separate from the rest of nature, we don't think anything like that is going to happen to us.

One of my favourite stories is re-told by the wisdom teacher Cynthia Bourgeault. I've told it here before.

It tells the tale of a wandering acorn, who comes upon a group of fellow acorns.

They are beautiful, well-put-together acorns indeed.

They've taken workshops such as "How to polish your shell to get the most out of it."

Screwing up his courage and taking a deep breath, the newcomer points to the giant oak tree beside him and says:

"My dear acorn friends, I have some wonderful and terrible news!

I've learned that we're going to become...that!"

Of course they laugh at him, because it's so unbelievable.

But then things get worse.

He explains that, in order to grow into mighty oak trees, each of them must go deep underground, and allow their beautiful shells to be cracked open.

Needless to say, they want nothing to do with him, and they send him away immediately.¹

What, me, change?

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¹ Cynthia Bourgeault adaptation of a story by Jacob Needleman, in *The Wisdom Way of Knowing* (Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 2005), 64-65.

I suspect we all can think of times when personal change was called for, and we simply weren't ready to do it.

It wasn't the season. We might have deferred the change for awhile, or pretended it would never be required.

But Life—with its miraculous, ever-changing, creative and transformative ability—has other plans for us.

We may not like the changes that life has in store for us—

We may avoid them, deny them, rail against them—

But when we look back at our lives, we might discover that it's often the things we resist the most, that have the most to teach us.

Whether it's a particularly challenging aspect of a relationship, an unpleasant task that's part of a job, something about ourselves we'd rather not see... a bitter disappointment or a painful loss...

These are the things that wrest change from us... and that bring about growth that could not take place any other way.

In the spirit of change this morning, rather than speak more now I'd like to sing... and then I'll say a little more.

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That flavour's an acquired taste,
a bitter taste, it's true.
Today you let it go to waste,
but it'll grow on you.
It will grow, it'll grow on you.

Another complicated day,
You're barely pulling through.
You don't think it went your way
But it'll grow on you.
It will grow, it'll grow on you.

And as we all get older,
Our tastes will surely change
We'll savour what's in front of us
With no room to complain
Find sweet satisfaction
In just a drop or two
Tastes better as time passes by
It'll grow on you.

Supper's ready, table set
Stainless steel and linen
Try something you haven't yet
Give thanks for what you're given
And it'll grow...it'll grow on you
It will grow, it'll grow on you.

As we all get older,
Our ways will surely change
We'll seek the good in everything

if such good things remain
Find love and forgiveness
As days grow precious few
Tastes better as time passes by
It'll grow on you

You'll find that as life passes by
It'll grow on you.²

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The playwright Tennessee Williams once wrote:

“The world is violent and mercurial.
It will have its way with you.

We are saved only by love—
love for each other and the love that we pour
into the [creative activity] we feel compelled to share:
being a parent, being a writer, being a painter, being a friend.”

“We live,” he said, “in a perpetually burning building,
and what we must save from it, all the time, is love.”

For me, this seems to confirm the inevitability of change,
and the raw fact that it so often involves suffering.

But it's also hopeful,
because it reminds me that despite the
catastrophe that change can be,

² Lynn Harrison “It'll Grow on You,” from *Broadview*, 2006 (SOCAN)

love can--and does--survive.

The playwright calls us to pour out the love we have rather than hold it back...

As might be our impulse...
in response to the change that confronts us.

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One of the best-known wisdom texts on the theme of personal change is the Serenity Prayer, written in 1934 by American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr.

It's widely used in many 12 Step programs, enabling countless people to make changes they never thought possible.

“God, grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change
courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Hearing this prayer, we think back with sympathy to Milarepa, the hero in Peter's story, who tried everything in his power to change his situation...

To evict the demons from his life...

Only to face the fact that the only thing he could do was to invite them in for tea...

which opened the door to his salvation.

That is to say: “we are saved only by love.

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Sometimes the most important change we need to make is to accept the changes life has in store for us.

As we grow in spiritual maturity,
which, of course, takes many years...
we may find that we are being transformed in
surprising and wonderful ways.

We may discover that we’re no longer bothered by something
that used to drive us bonkers.

We may find ourselves experiencing joy
even in a time of great challenge.

We may discover in ourselves a new capacity
for a task we always thought was beyond us.

We might let go of a hurt...find forgiveness...
make a courageous choice...

Or experience an unexpected and newfound
gratitude for life,
in whatever shape life is taking right now.

In a few moments we’ll hear a hymn that was inspired
by a famous prayer written by St. Francis of Assisi
in the 12th Century.

It expresses the desire to be transformed
into an instrument of peace...

That is, to be changed
so that we create love
where hatred and fear existed before.

My observation, and my experience, is that,
when we approach life in all its cataclysmic change
with an open and willing heart--
we can become,
not always but more often,
the instruments of the peace we seek.

We can embrace the uniquely whole
and inherently worthy people we are,

no matter what changes have taken place in our lives...
and what changes are yet to come.

What, me, change?

I have, and I will, as will we all.
By the grace of life.

Amen.