

“Change 4: Change is Gonna Come”

Rev. Lynn Harrison
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
20 January 2019

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.

“Comfort me, oh my soul.”

Whether we’ve spoken them out loud, or sung these words, they ring true, and familiar, for many of us.

Shawn and I have certainly heard them, phrased in personal ways, as people in this congregation and elsewhere express their dismay at changes taking place in the world.

We lift up and hold onto our Unitarian principles:

“The inherent worth and dignity of every person,”
“Justice, equity and compassion in human relations,”
“Respect for the interdependent web of all existence”...

And yet we fear, at times, that we are swimming against the cultural current.

Songs such as “Building a New Way,” “Wind of Change” and Sam Cooke’s “A Change is Gonna Come” express hope for racial, economic and environmental justice...

And yet, one can't help but hear,
underneath the positive conviction,
a distinct note of longing...

An acknowledgment of loss
mixed in with the work of change...

and a fear that the change we seek may not come...
or may not come fast enough.

The beauty of music, poetry and art
is that they can express both the longing and the hope...

The faith and the doubt...
That underlies all of our reflections on global change.

It would be impossible for me to offer a reflection today
that offered optimism without realism...

Light without shadow...
Faith without doubt.

And yet, as we reflect on both the hopeful possibilities
of change in front of us,

As well as possible changes that might shake us to our core,

I hope we can build in ourselves a new way of being
with life...that can carry us and others
through the changes ahead.

§

There is somewhere we are headed now. But where?

Into what winds of change are we being swept,
as a result of our own desires
for more, for better, and for faster?

Today, human existence itself—
not to mention the survival of thousands of other species
on this planet—

is threatened by change that seems too
all-encompassing to comprehend.

In this face of this, we seek comfort...
while not wanting our comfort to come at the expense of
others...and at the same time realizing that really,
that's the only kind of comfort we know.

As Thomas Berry wrote, in the book I quoted from earlier,

“We are dealing with a profound reversal in our perspective
on ourselves and the universe around us.

This is not a change simply in some specific
aspect of our ethical conduct.

Nor is it merely a modification of our existing cultural
context.

What is demanded of us now is to change attitudes that are so deeply bound into our basic cultural patterns that they seem to us as an imperative of the very nature of our being.”¹

These are pretty big changes!

Indeed, prophetic voices from all corners are describing changes on a scale never before imagined.

Naomi Klein expressed it simply in the title of her book “This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate.”

The prominent Christian theologian Brian MacLaren put it similarly in his book “Everything Must Change.”

Depending on where we stand in the river of change, we may hear these words as hopeful, or deeply worrisome.

Perhaps it’s some confusing combination of both!

Yet these authors and others do come out on the side of optimism.

Joanna Macy in her fine book “Active Hope” wrote in 2012 of “The Great Turning.” She described it as:

¹ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future* (Three Rivers Press: New York, 1999), 105.

“The essential adventure of our time, [involving] the transition from a doomed economy of industrial growth to a life-sustaining society committed to the recovery of our world.”²

Thomas Berry described the changes coming as “The Great Work,” saying that “we are now experiencing a moment of significance far beyond what any of us can imagine.”³

§

The Sam Cooke song “A Change is Gonna Come,” which we’ll hear a little later, expresses a longing for the change of racial justice in particular.

It was a song written in the hopeful era of the Sixties...

But even now, as we know, racism and inequality seem entrenched in systems that seem designed to perpetuate injustice...in Canada, the U.S. and around the world.

We may continue to fervently hope that a change for the better will come...but we also understand that the necessary changes are complex and systemic.

They are dependent on economic and political decisions and intertwined in ways that affect all life.

² Joanna Macy & Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We’re In Without Going Crazy* (Novato; New World Library, 2012), 26.

³ Berry, 201.

It was reported just a few days ago that the 26 richest people in the world now own as much as 3.8 billion other people.⁴

We also now know that the richest 10% of the world's population is responsible for half of global carbon emissions.⁵

The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has warned that the world has only twelve years to avert climate catastrophe.⁶

This frightening news has been widely reported—which is a change in itself.

Many of us can remember that only a few years ago, such dire warnings would never have made the mainstream media!

And of course, we hear them now with mixed feelings.

We might wonder whether we're capable of making the changes that are necessary, as individuals, as a society or as a species.

⁴ Tami Luhby, "The top 26 billionaires own \$1.4 trillion—as much as 3.8 billion other people. CNN Business. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/20/business/oxfam-billionaires-davos/index.html>

⁵ "World's richest 10% produce half of global carbon emissions, says Oxfam" in The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/dec/02/worlds-richest-10-produce-half-of-global-carbon-emissions-says-oxfam>

⁶ "We have 12 years to limit climate change catastrophe, warns UN" in The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/08/global-warming-must-not-exceed-15c-warns-landmark-un-report>

Do we have (in Thomas Berry's words) the collective "inner vision" required to make the changes necessary now?

And can we change ourselves personally,
in whatever ways we must...
so we can respond with courage and kindness,
through every coming transition.

No matter what changes lie ahead,
we are called to the work of spiritual renewal:

To cultivate inner well-being,
from which courage and action can arise.

§

As we've reflected over several Sundays now,
change is inevitable.

"The river I step in, is not the river I stand in,"
said the Greek philosopher.

He said it in a poetic and somewhat puzzling way
that itself challenges our usual ways of understanding.

Life is change.

And our negative judgment of certain changes,
that is, our resistance to them,

...can sometimes prevent us from seeing their positive side.

In her book “A Paradise Built in Hell,” Rebecca Solnit writes of “the extraordinary communities that arise in disaster” in stories like this one:

“A friend told me of being trapped in a terrible fog, one of the dense fogs that overtakes California’s Central Valley periodically.

On this occasion,
the fog mixed with dust from the cotton fields
created a shroud so perilous that the highway patrol
stopped all traffic on the highway.

For two days she was stranded with many others
in a small diner.

She and her husband slept upright,
shoulder to shoulder with strangers,
in the banquettes of the diner’s booths.

Although food and water began to run short,
they had a marvelous time.

The people gathered there had little in common,
but they all opened up,
began to tell each other the stories of their lives,
and by the time the road was safe,
my friend and her husband were reluctant to leave.

But they went onward,
home to New Mexico for the holidays,
where everyone looked at them [utterly perplexed],
as they told the story of [being stranded] with such [joy].

That time in the diner was the first time her partner,
a Native American, had felt a sense of belonging
in society at large.”

Rebecca Solnit writes,
“Such redemption amid disruption
is common.”⁷

§

It’s just one small story...and of course, we don’t want to
romanticize disaster and suffering.

And yet, as Solnit argues, there can be a “doorway in the
ruins” that can point not only toward resilience in a time of
trial...

...but a radical reconfiguring of values that could, just
possibly, prevent the worst of all possible changes from
coming true.

She writes, “The joy in disaster comes, when it comes,
from [an] immersion in service and survival, and from an
affection that is not private and personal but civic:

⁷ Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 4.

The love of strangers for each other,
of a citizen for his or her city,
of belonging to a greater whole,
of doing the work that matters. [...]

“These loves remain largely dormant and unacknowledged
in contemporary post-industrial society.

Rebecca Solnit writes:

“This is the way in which everyday life is a disaster.”⁸

§

It may be that when we are faced with the most difficult
challenges, our inherent ability to love each other will carry us
through the changes we thought we couldn't handle.

In the meantime, though, simply the anticipation of change
and challenge, especially on a global scale,
can create great anxiety in many of us...
unless we make personal changes.

Fortunately, that's where religious community
and spiritual practice can help:
by pointing us toward the simple practices that
ground us in interconnectedness, love and peace.

§

⁸ Solnit, 306.

The Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh is currently approaching the great change of dying.

Now 92 years old, he has returned to his native Viet Nam, where he is resting in a Buddhist temple, and no longer receiving medication.⁹

In his 2013 book “Love Letter to the Earth”, he wrote:

“There is a revolution that needs to happen and it starts from inside each one of us.

When we change the way we see the world, when we realize that we and the Earth are one and we begin to live with mindfulness, our own suffering will start to ease.

When we are no longer overwhelmed by our own suffering, we will have the compassion and understanding to treat the Earth with love and respect.

Restoring balance to ourselves, we can begin the work of restoring balance to the Earth.”¹⁰

⁹ Liam Fitzpatrick, “The Monk Who Taught the World Mindfulness Awaits the End of This Life”, Time Magazine, January 29, 2019. Accessed online: <http://time.com/5511729/monk-mindfulness-art-of-dying/> Feb. 2, 2019.

¹⁰ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love Letter to the Earth* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2013), 56-57.

“We may think of the Earth’s problems,
or our own personal problems,
as overwhelming and we may feel helpless.

“But just by paying attention to our breathing,” he says,
“we can bring about a clarity that will give us insight about
what we can do to help ourselves and to help our world.”¹¹

§

What is remarkable about this kind of teaching—
and you find it not only in Buddhism but in other wisdom
teachings as well—

is that it does not require us to “fix” or “eliminate”
our feelings of fear or anxiety,
but rather to mindfully be present to them.

This is a complete turnaround,
in terms of what our culture has taught us.

Instead of seeking escape from real or imagined fears,
we can learn to find peace in the midst of suffering—
our own and others—and respond with love.

Whatever “change is gonna come”
whether it be desired or dreaded,
we can learn to be fully present to what is:

¹¹ Ibid, 42.

Awake to our ability to respond in love
to this present moment of change.

May this be the great work that each of us can do:

To turn and return
to love, and love again...

Through all the changes
that are yet to come.

Amen.