

Making our Way
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There are times we embrace it. Sometimes we are the authors of it. There are times we do whatever we can to prevent it. Sometimes it is helpful and at other times it drops us to our knees. There is no avoiding it though. Our eyesight, our families, the world we thought we knew – everything changes.

Sometimes the rate of change is so slow that we can pretend it isn't happening. When change is in slow-motion mode, it is possible to fail to see it. Last week I was looking through some old family photographs, and it became more than apparent how much slow, water drop by water drop, change had occurred in my life. The face looking back at the picture looks more like my daughters' than mine, and the hair colour is distinctively darker than it is today. Changes that I, day by day didn't see, didn't really notice, were made obvious by the photograph, reminding me of what I might have failed to notice.

Change and transformation are as present in our lives as oxygen. And we generally live as if they just are, without a lot of conscious thought. For the most part we carry on, living our lives as we were unaware of the shifts within and around us. We get up in the morning, drink our coffee, dress, brush our teeth, and if asked, "what's new", we might understandably reply, "not much". Your routine hasn't really changed. The people around you, or at least the significant ones are the same as they were. Work, or hobbies fall into an expected routine. We eat dinner, walk the dog, read, call a friend or watch a show... and so it goes. And at other times change is so obvious, so evident, we can't fail to notice it— we met someone, we've moved, switched jobs, had our hearts broken, welcomed a baby, had an election, started a project – and yes, at those times if we were asked, "What's new?", we'd have an answer.

But the truth is, that change is inevitable. Each day, however much it might look like the one before, is different from the one before. We begin each moment changed from the moment before. New cells are growing, different synapses are firing, aging happens, the sun and moon and stars are not where they were just a moment earlier. The world, and we are, changed.

I recently came across a poem, by Wislawa Szymborska called *Nothing Twice*.

It says, in part,

*Nothing can ever happen twice.
In consequence, the sorry fact is
that we arrive here improvised
and leave without the chance to practice.*

*Even if there is no one dumber,
if you're the planet's biggest dunce,
you can't repeat the class in summer:
this course is only offered once.*

*No day copies yesterday,
no two nights will teach what bliss is
in precisely the same way,
with precisely the same kisses.*

*Why do we treat the fleeting day
with so much needless fear and sorrow?
It's in its nature not to stay
Today is always gone tomorrow*

The course is only offered once. We arrive improvised.

We sometimes hold on to the illusion that things are not changing. We fail to pay attention to the reality that our lives are lived on shifting sand. But we know, really, don't we, that change is inevitable, except as the joke goes, in the vending machine. There have been times in my life when I really got it, I really got the reality that each day was a fresh adventure, unlike any I'd ever known before. I remember being a child, waking and wondering what exciting things were ahead of me... wondering what I'd do, where I'd go, and practically tingling with the thrill of it all. But I'm not a child anymore, and each day is becoming a smaller and smaller fraction of my lived life. Singular days don't stand out for me the way that they did when I'd only lived 3 ½ thousand of them. But now when I've seen over 25 thousand days I fail to be as amazed by them as I once was. But we are given opportunities to remember the novelty, the freshness of days, even as we age. Looking at a young couple, all wide eyed, holding hands, at the bus stop reminds me. Time with children reminds us. It's amazing how they, from one day to the next, changes. A new skill that wasn't there yesterday – each day is new. No day copies yesterday.

And many of us act as if change is to be avoided – we treat it as disruption, an inconvenience and we long nostalgically for the elusive 'old days'.

When we anticipate change, we often do so reluctantly, afraid that it means learning new ways, adapting ourselves in uncomfortable ways, adjusting to patterns and routines that we didn't invite in. Change can bring a sense of disequilibrium, sometimes even, the changes we do invite in. You all know something about that. Today is the seventh time we've been able to gather for Sunday morning in this new space. The project timeline was counted in years and months, not days, and I know that there have been times when it has been frustrating and has tugged on the cohesiveness of your community. I hate to let you know, settling in, figuring out the realities of life here, vs the previous space, will continue to require us to adapt. Change makes it hard to orient

ourselves because the familiar landmarks are not easily found. It is harder to connect to the things that ground us. And we do arrive improvised. We have never lived today, with its particular set of realities before. We are always winging it. And some of us are more comfortable with that than others are, and some of us even appreciate it. There are days when change has us feeling like a square peg trying to fit into the round hole that today presents us. And just when we find ourselves able to whittle the edges away, just when we find that gentle curve where there used to be right angles, the moment is gone and we find the hole is altogether a different shape and we fit, if at all, awkwardly. Change, it has been said, is what people do when they have no options left.

Of course none of this is to say that the lessons we learn in today's unique situations won't be relevant in another time, in another situation that is similar to today's. We can grow, we can find ourselves and our understandings expanded by change. Today's refinement of the swim stroke, is still applicable next week, when the body is stronger, or weaker or changed... the learning isn't for nothing. Just as the piano chord of today becomes part of tomorrow's song. The computer code can still work next month, even though we are not exactly the same person we were. We come improvised, but if we pay attention, if we practice, if we apply lessons, we are improvising with new knowledge, new capacity and new ways of adapting to the unique circumstances we find ourselves in. No day copies today, we won't find ourselves here again – and that's ok. It doesn't mean we wake each day without the accumulated knowledge of yesterday to apply to today.

Change is inevitable, life is a constant dance of hello and goodbye and nothing truly stays the same. If nothing stays the same, if nothing can, in the long run, be counted on, isn't it reasonable to be terrified at the prospect of the unknown. It's all fine to say that each day is an adventure, that the wise embrace change, but as we get older and our knees and our backs are ever present reminders of the reality that change is inevitable, then the sober reality of change is something that seems a little less exhilarating and a lot more terrifying. We can do things to soften the reality, we aren't without some capacity to manage and direct change. But there is not one of us here today that won't at some point in our lives want to stop time, to freeze things just the way they are, or just the way they were, and to live with the familiar. But we can't, and part of the work of living is learning to be ok with that reality. And that is why the inevitability of change is a matter for theological consideration. Major religions have something to say about change, and seek, in their own way to reassure us...

Buddhism reminds us that everything is changing. That all is transient and that impermanence is a basic principle. It suggests that suffering is the result of wanting things to be otherwise. Wanting to hold on, to the moment, this form, this relationship, this home – to anything, is impossible. Letting go of the notion that we can hold on is the key to peace. There is wisdom in this approach. Because ultimately, despite our efforts, all that we know, see, and love will someday cease to be. Much as we try, we can't protect ourselves, those we love, or any of our comforts from the inevitable. A storm, a diagnosis, or any number of things can bring the end of all that we hold on

to. And that seems sad, and cruel, because we insert our own will into the equation. We want to stay healthy, we want our comfortable lives to continue, we want a lot of things. And not one of them is guaranteed. Buddhism reminds us, that all that wanting, all that clinging, can get in the way of peace, because it interferes with our ability to accept that life is bigger than us, that we aren't in control. Buddhism offers the comfort that change need not, if we are able to accept its inevitability, be a problem. I think that we, in the west, often dismiss this notion as, somewhat fantastical. How can we not suffer, how can we not be sad when we say goodbye? Even if we intellectually and spiritually embrace the notion that everything we know is an illusion, aren't we human, don't we have human hearts – ones that treasure connection and love? Yes, we do. I don't think the teachings suggest that we won't at times suffer. But it does suggest that we can move through loss and its accompanying sadness, and get to a point where we accept what has happened, where we stop shaking our fist, and asking 'why me', and instead can learn to appreciate what we had.

Judeo-Christian teachings offer another sort of reassurance about the inevitability of change. The Hebrew and Christian scriptures both acknowledge the pain of death, the ultimate change. In Psalms we read of the terrors, the fear and the trembling that the prospect of death brings. In the Christian Scriptures, we are moved by the suffering of the people who are mourning the death of Lazarus. Death is understood as a loss. In James, Chapter 4 there is a passage: "For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes." We are impermanent... Graves in old New England towns are decorated with hourglasses and skeletal angels of death – intending to remind us that today is fleeting. But for those who follow this the Christian path there is a comfort too... our bodies may become dust, our days may be short but our spirits, our souls, are promised everlasting life and death is referred to as having fallen asleep in Jesus. Some take this to mean that change and loss, and ultimately death, are to be welcomed as an opportunity to practice faith and discipleship. I don't think that's the case, I don't think that's what is asked for, what is demanded. You may recall the Hebrew Scripture story of Job, a good man, who lost his children, his wealth and his health, and who, even at the encouragement of friends, never doubted God's plan for him. Job was experiencing the kinds of changes that our worst nightmares are made of. The story doesn't suggest that Job doesn't suffer, but rather it teaches that he doesn't assume he knows the reasons for his suffering and that he doesn't assume that his desires should take precedent over the divine plan. Despite his confusion and grief - to the mental breaking point, Job understood that there were mysteries beyond his control. Job suffered, and he was, it seems, unjustly punished. The story reminds us that we can't understand everything, that our ideas of what is fair and right, are limited, but it also reminds us that our relationship with God can offer a way through the suffering. Change is inevitable, but faith can offer comfort in this life and redemption and reconciliation in the next.

Earth-based traditions also provide some theological insights into change and offer ease to those who struggle. In earth-based traditions the idea that the world is in a constant state of change is seen as a great wonder, cause for celebration, for goodbyes and for hope. Things come; things go. Hard seasons give way to easier seasons – and

so too it is with our lives. Earth-based traditions encourage awareness of all the changes that happen each day. The dry and hard seed falls on the ground, when the flower's season is done. If we stopped paying attention that might seem a cruel end to a beautiful bloom. But the change of seasons makes the ground moist, and the seed shell softens, it swells and as the earth warms again a new sprout emerges. Earth-based philosophies don't deny the hard changes that occur in the natural world. They don't "disneyfy" the death of trees and animals and people. These and other changes are real, and they are at times difficult. But they also remind us that today's decaying tree will feed tomorrow's forest. Individuals come and individuals go – we create rituals to honor those arrivals and departures, and many of the stations in between – and there is for those who find resonance with Earth-based spiritual practices a comfort to know that changes are part of a flowing stream – that nothing is every completely lost but only re-created in another way and in another time.

Three traditions, three approaches. Lofty and challenging, each one of them. And really, what the heck do they have to do with the changes of my life, my routine, my comforts. Buddhism isn't full of comfort when I'm challenged by the new bus schedule, the one that makes it harder to get to work on time. Christianity doesn't have a lot to say about my annoyance that the grocery store stopped carrying my favourite coffee. Earth-based traditions seem a little over the top when I'm getting cranky about the new version of my favourite software. And none of them really apply when I'm frustrated with the new tax form or angry and scared and worried about the news. These days there seems to be so much that has a claim to my attention and concern. I know there is so much that claims yours. Maybe your answer doesn't lie in Buddhism or Christianity or an Earth Centered tradition, but it does seem to me that its part of our work in this world to figure out where our answer does lie.

When we are honest, we know that we do live with change, every day. Some changes we embrace and some we don't. And if we are to make our way through this world, through our lives, we need to figure out how to reconcile ourselves with the reality that we are not in charge.

Let's go back to that poem.

*Why do we treat the fleeting day
with so much needless fear and sorrow?
It's in its nature not to stay
Today is always gone tomorrow*

However, unsettling the fact of all that change is, isn't it an amazing thing too. Sure, I wish that I could, from time to time, freeze time. I wish I could make that baby's first laugh happen again and again and again. I wish I could hold on, for a bit longer to people I have loved. I wish I could experience that exhilaration of the first bicycle ride again – but I don't want to stay in today forever. There will be changes. Some will be of my choosing, others won't be. Some will seem to challenge everything I know and

trust. Some may threaten to break me. Some may. But I'm here today. You are here today. We are here together. We are breathing, our hearts are beating. We've come here today and find, hopefully, some reassurance in familiar faces, maybe we'll find some ease in a new understanding or perhaps we'll consider how we might live in the world in new ways. We've come here today, knowing that it is good to travel with others, to witness the lives of others and to have others be witnesses to ours. These are extraordinary times. There are changes afoot. Today's reality will not be tomorrow's. Some of you will be working in the days and months ahead to be agents of change. Others will be resisting the urge to curl up in bed with the blankets over your head. But regardless of what lies ahead, being together makes the hard changes easier to manage, and makes it easier to imagine bringing hoped for changes into reality.

And in the meantime, we are together. This moment is wonderful. I'll take it. And I'll take it, along with the sure knowledge that one of the reasons it is wonderful is that it will, just like that (snap) become a memory. We won't be here, like this, ever again, things will change – they always do. But I'll have the memory, and I'm grateful you are part of it.