

***Hope Guides the Transformation***  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver  
November 3, 2024

***Reflection on the Theme© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert***

I was 8 years old and in third grade. We were living in Pullman, WA. My school, Franklin Elementary, held a mock election that year. I don't remember if we voted for anything but the President, but what I remember is that it was George McGovern vs. Richard Nixon. I knew for a fact that George McGovern was going to win. My parents were voting for him, my parent's friends were voting for him, as were all my friends at school. And in fact, he did win, in my school. He won the mock election. I was so elated! And then incredibly confused and disappointed when I learned he hadn't won at the national level. Why didn't everyone vote like we did? Couldn't they see that he was the right candidate? That was the first time I was surprised and disappointed with national politics. It wasn't the last time.

It was years later that I heard stories from my family about the 1968 election. I was only four years old at the time. We were living in Chicago, Illinois, then, the suburb of Clarendon Hills, actually. The Democratic National Convention was in downtown Chicago that year. My dad had returned from a trip he'd been on and decided to go downtown where his office was to pick up something. His shock at the armed presence downtown was something he remembered to the end of his life and told me about often. He'd never seen anything like it before. I don't remember if he ever got to his office, but I know he went home right away and then watched with my mom and sister the confrontations and violence that unfolded on TV during that memorable convention. They had friends who were delegates and there who stayed with us afterwards, visibly shaken by the events they had witnessed firsthand. My sister developed a fear of police from watching that and tells me how scared she was when they attended the 1969 parade for astronauts Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins because of the armed police presence in downtown Chicago.

I'm struck by how our experiences growing up shape us. Despite my early experience with election disappointment, I still manage to hope for better outcomes. And I always take the time to vote. I have my parents and Franklin Elementary School to thank for understanding my civic duty and responsibility for our democratic processes.

***Hope Guides the Transformation© by Eric LaBrant***

An old quote from Dick Nolan suggests that politicians and diapers should be routinely changed for the same reason.

The framers of the US Constitution envisioned elections as a routine and consistent revolution, a non-violent "overthrow" of the administration in power. It creates a tradition that we might, through reelection, retain public servants we feel are doing well, but are under no obligation to do so. Many of us in Oregon and Washington have already voted, and the time for voting will be over less than two and a half days from now. One way or another, at the beginning of January, Jay Inslee will not be the governor of Washington, and at the end of January Joe Biden will not be president.

We can hope that one candidate or another will fill each role, and bring transformation and change that aligns with our personal values, but in any case things will be different.

With that change, this year, comes an extra layer of anxiety from of a social movement that disregards or even actively rejects democracy. Those surprised by the 2016 election results might feel some empathy for Rev. Kathryn's experience in third grade, and fear a repeat.

While much of the world struggles with authoritarian governments and autocrats, those of us who have grown up under late-stage capitalism have become accustomed to a status quo that, claims to vest control of government with the population as a whole, not subject to the whims and moods of despots or tyrants. That feels especially wobbly this year. It's not an overreaction, with various thinktanks, talking heads, and even candidates calling for authoritarian rule or outright dictatorship in a country we've come to associate with democracy and freedom.

Change touches the world around us in other ways, with the onward, almost relentless march of technology. The growth of technology and medicine are accelerating more and more quickly. The first artificial radio transmission on Earth was in 1897, and here we are with supercomputers in our pockets that let us video chat with folks on other continents.

The drumbeat of change touches our individual lives as well. We will all eventually die. Those we love will not survive forever. If we're fortunate, we'll grow older and older before that, which will bring changes of its own. We've been through the changes of childhood. Being born, learning to speak and read, and gaining skills to move through the world more independently. And we've been given the responsibilities that come with that independence. Growing up brings profound physical changes during adolescence, and emotional growth that is sometimes joyful and sometimes painful. Throughout adulthood, we'll experience changes in the roles we play in our lives. We may become parents or grandparents, aunts or uncles, or in-laws. We might change careers, or progress within the type of work we do. We might take on new roles of service within our community. We will develop new friendships and relationships that begin with the spark of a common interest or shared experience, and deepen over time. Some of those roles may draw to a close as well, with job losses, retirements, break-ups, or death. We may change the place we call home, move to another residence, or make bigger shifts by moving to a new city or even another country.

There is no escaping change as long as we are part of this life -- change is a-coming.

Change is scary. Full stop. It is.

That's how evolution has wired us. For millions of years, change has signaled danger. Early hominids were hunted and eaten by unfamiliar predators. Storms could spark wildfires and flash floods. Strangers might introduce disease. For all of our subsequent evolution and accomplishments, we still carry that fear with us in our DNA and the deepest parts of our brains. Let's accept that for what it is. There's no shame in fearing change. It's a real and natural part of being alive.

That fear of change can also be exhausting, with much of our modern culture and society deliberately structured to exploit that fear.

Entire categories of medicine and cosmetics promise to help us resist the changes that come from aging. Products like insurance promise to protect us from the more painful aspects of changes in our lives.

One of the most aggressive exploitations of our fear of change is at the heart of our current political environment. This election carries heavy, heavy undertones of fear of change. Politicians across the political spectrum tell us that this is the most pivotal election of our lifetimes, and universally promise

that terrible upheaval will inevitably occur if their opponent is elected. Some candidates promise sweeping changes as a way to undo social changes of recent decades, hoping to stoke our fears and appeal to our primal desire to keep things just as they are.

Conservative talking points encourage us to fear cultural changes, such as greater acceptance of folks who identify as LGBTQ, or allowing women and doctors to control decisions about women's health. We're threatened with no less than the loss of our families and our society should we allow those changes to progress. Liberal talking points encourage us to fear the loss of our own lives and the lives of our loved ones if their freedom to make medical decisions is stolen, tragedies that are happening right now in places where bodily autonomy has been revoked.

Conservative commentators ask us to fear the changes that might be asked of us if we acknowledge America's history of racism and genocide, or the changes that might come should we acknowledge and welcome immigrants into our society. Liberal commentators press us to fear the regression and loss of freedom that comes with fear of those who look or sound different.

Talking heads actively explore worst-case what-if scenarios as part of their daily routine, and it's common to cast this year's election as a challenge to democracy itself. Let's not invalidate our fears. Change is scary, and this year's election is at its heart a referendum on pluralistic democracy -- asking ourselves the question of whether society is better off with a variety of backgrounds and walks of life. But that doesn't excuse efforts to use our own fears against us instead of discussing ideas and policies on their merits. There is more to democracy than being terrified of how things will change if the other side wins.

At the same time, we face well-grounded scientific warnings about changes humanity is forcing upon the natural environment. Our global energy system relies on the ancient technology of digging up rocks and lighting them on fire, and we've learned that it's warming the entire planet, bringing dangerous problems with it.

Humanity is depleting our freshwater supplies above ground and below, and contaminating that water with everything from solvents to microplastics to carcinogenic chemicals. While some progress is in the works, as a society we are cutting down forests far faster than they can regrow. We are changing entire ecosystems in ways that endanger our own lives, and a certain amount of fear of these changes is healthy, especially if it motivates us toward a more sustainable path.

As part of this human life, our own bodies can cause frightening and painful circumstances by changing, whether through illness or just the wear and tear of time and daily activity. There are things I could do in my 20's that hit different these days. There may be artificial knees, hips, valves, or other devices in our futures. We might find ourselves needing more help reaching certain things, or going places. Our glasses might need updating.

Then there's death. Death itself is a normal part of life, but represents a change that we can't see past, which can make it feel extra frightening. We are wired by evolution to fear death, and that fear increases our chances of survival. That too is a fear we should accept as a natural part of being alive. And while death is an entirely normal part of living, the loss of loved ones represents a change and a loss to those of us who are still living.

(deep breath)

While we're wired for change to always be scary, it's not necessarily bad.

All of civilization relies on the change of weather from sunshine to rain and back again. Growth is change, not just physically but emotionally. Things in our lives that were difficult or frightening 20 years ago might not be so bad with the tools and knowledge we gain over time. We have the capacity to choose certain changes that benefit us, choosing to change certain habits to make ourselves stronger or more healthy, emotionally or physically. We might change how we show up for certain relationships, or how we talk to folks we disagree with.

Most of the cells in our bodies will change several times over the course of our lives, and it's a good thing they do! The skin on your face is entirely different from what it was 30 days ago.

Change can even go beyond simply being healthy or positive, adding wonder and excitement to our lives. The Wright Brothers' first flight took place in 1903, and only 120 years later we cross entire continents in hours instead of weeks or months. Diseases such as cholera, typhoid, and polio that used to dramatically shorten the human lifespan are scarcely thought of today, due to improvements in sanitation, vaccination, and education. The advent of the printing press and an increase in literacy has changed the very nature of how we move through a world saturated in text, and enriches our lives with information and ideas, with stories and poetry. Our understanding of the solar system and beyond enables us to dream of distant civilizations and humanity's future. The information age brought dangers of cyberbullying and misinformation, but also allows us to connect and keep in touch with loved ones and friends near and far.

How then can we tip the scales from fear to wonder when facing change?

I was raised by a fundamentalist evangelical preacher, which shows how much beliefs can change over time, but I want to share a favorite verse from the King James Bible this morning, from the Book of Genesis, chapter 4, verse 3... A.

"And in process of time it came to pass." I'll share it again. Genesis 4, verse 3a. "And in process of time it came to pass."

We can remind ourselves that turmoil and upheaval are temporary. As a first responder friend of mine liked to say, ALL bleeding eventually stops.

We can also zoom out a bit for a change of perspective. Entire empires have come and gone, and even the United States of America that we call home will eventually transition to something else. I promise. The USA will not exist forever. While it's certain that autocracies will threaten human peace and freedom, so too will there be other democracies that grow and flourish, and bend the moral arc of the universe toward justice.

Climate change feels like and is in fact a dire emergency, and other human activities threaten the interdependent web of which we are all part, but ice ages have erased whole ecosystems altogether. Much of the original ecosystem of eastern Washington is buried in the Willamette Valley due to the Spokane and Missoula floods. Those entire ecosystems bounced back perhaps more quickly than we might expect.

"Okay" might look different from what we're used to, but... it's going to be okay, eventually. This doesn't excuse us from our obligation to fight for justice, especially on behalf of those who are marginalized and bear the brunt of social change more severely, folks for whom things are definitely not okay. But in the grand scheme of things, collectively, we're going to be okay.

In our own lives, we can heal, and even transform, from negative change. We are capable of suffering tragedy and loss, and even emerging better than when we started. Loss can help us find greater

appreciation for the loved ones in our lives. A period of scarcity can help us feel more gratitude for our blessings. The COVID-19 pandemic has helped many of us, myself included, more deeply appreciate the gift of human connection.

Learning how to accept change is a great first step, but we are more than passive recipients of the changes in our lives. We can and should be active agents in transforming the world around us, and may take some comfort in the agency that comes with being active participants in the changes swirling around us.

As our society faces upheaval from technology and AI, we should be vocal about protecting the rights of workers. As we face political turmoil, we are obligated to speak up for those whose rights are threatened. As individuals, we can change lives around us for the better by showing compassion and dignity to others, especially those who are struggling. We can work to lessen the impact of human activity on the natural environment by thinking about our own choices, and encouraging others to do the same. And within our own lives, we can choose, deliberately, to make changes and cultivate habits and practices that benefit ourselves and our loved ones.

As described in the story for all ages, we can choose, one starfish at a time, how we change the world we live in, even as it changes us.