

Change

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Stony Brook, NY, March 2013

Rev. Margie Allen and Rev. Dr. Linda Anderson

Opening Words (Octavia E. Butler)

All that you touch
You Change.

All that you Change
Changes you.

The only lasting truth
is Change.

God
is Change.

Chalice Lighting and Silence

[Covenant Review]

Check-in: Open reflections on the past month or the following *optional* focus: Assume that you had to choose one time period in your life to which you would return and in which you would remain until the end of your life. Little would change over that time. [We're not talking about whether this is a good thing or a bad thing—it's just happening...]. What period would you choose and why?

Activity

Facilitators: *Hand out to each group member index cards and pens. Tell them that they will have a few minutes to “free associate” with a word you will give them. Invite them to write down as many words and phrases as they can that come into their heads when you say the word. Suggest that they not censor themselves or do much “word-smithing.” The word is “CHANGE.” Tell them that they may find it helpful to think of times of change in their lives and see if new words and phrases come up out of each new scene they remember. After 2-5 minutes, have them set the cards aside.*

Topic Introduction

What a love/hate relationship we humans have with change! When our lives are happy and full, we want things to stay just as they are: like teenagers in love, we can't imagine our feelings ever changing. When life is messy and difficult, we pray that change will come soon, but find it hard to believe that it ever will. And in both cases the inevitable force of change rolls on, introducing some bittersweet into the happiness; some peace and joy into the despair.

Some of us take to change naturally, gladly, seeing excitement and interesting challenges in new situations. Others find change unsettling, disruptive, something to be avoided if at all possible – and slowed down if it can't be avoided. But change can often

operate on its own time schedule, and at those times we can neither hasten it nor delay it to suit our own purposes.

How do we develop a relationship with change that allows for graceful acceptance, while giving us room to explore our feelings? How do we craft a rooted yet flexible approach to life that invites change in without risking our integrity? Here is where we start, in our sacred circle of trust, where we are free to explore our own path and learn from the paths of others.

Quotations

Activity

Facilitators: *Offer group members the opportunity to read the words on their cards out loud to the group, if they would like to. After everyone who wants to has read, give each person a copy of Gil Rendle's "Roller Coaster of Change" graphic to contemplate for a moment. We have included the article from which this graphic came for Facilitators to read. The article is about congregational change, but it applies to individual and family change as well. If people ask questions, you will be able to answer them, but we don't think a full explanation from the article is necessary in order for a rich exchange of observations to happen. Invite people to share what connections they see between the words that have been shared and Gil's "roller coaster."*

Questions for Group Reflection

1. Consider telling a brief story about a significant change at any point in your life that was **completely unexpected**. Describe how you responded to it. How did it affect or change your life? Did you welcome or resist the change? Was there a message or lesson in the experience that nourished you spiritually?
2. Consider telling a brief story about a significant change in your life that you **purposefully created**. What did you lose and what did you gain in the process? Did the change bring you the gifts and challenges you hoped for?
3. Do you usually *avoid* change or *embrace* it? In what ways have you learned to handle the *fear* that comes as you contemplate and move through significant changes? It is possible to be "addicted" to change, to the adrenaline rush of leaving frustrations behind and stepping out into the unknown. If that is true of you, how do you balance the spiritual and practical rewards with the risks?
4. Have you ever functioned as an "agent of change" in a system such as a family, a congregation, a workplace, or some other community? Tell us a story about that.
5. As you look back on some of the biggest changes in your life, what can you say you learned about yourself in the process? What help and support was most effective for you as you made your way through times of change?

6. What changes in the surrounding culture have been most challenging or painful for you in the course of your life? What changes in the world around you have freed you to be more yourself?

Likes and Wishes (Likes: celebrations, gratitudes, appreciations for needs met; and Wishes: mournings, requests, acknowledgements of needs not met)

Closing Words and Chalice Extinguishing (Maya Angelou)

There were people who went to sleep last night,
poor and rich and white and black,
but they will never wake again.

And those dead folks would give anything at all
for just five minutes of this weather
or ten minutes of plowing.

So you watch yourself about complaining.

What you're supposed to do
when you don't like a thing is change it.
If you can't change it,
change the way you think about it.

Quotations

Nothing endures but change. ~Heraclitus

People do not resist change, per se. People resist loss. ~Ron Heifetz and Martin Linksy

Every possession and every happiness is but lent by chance for an uncertain time, and may therefore be demanded back the next hour. ~Arthur Schopenhauer

Nothing is so painful to the human mind as a great and sudden change. ~Mary Shelley

Be the change that you wish to see in the world. ~ Mahatma Gandhi

The world as we have created it is a process of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking. ~Albert Einstein

When we least expect it, life sets us a challenge to test our courage and willingness to change; at such a moment, there is no point in pretending that nothing has happened or in saying that we are not yet ready. The challenge will not wait. Life does not look back.

~Paulo Coelho (*The Devil and Miss Prym*)

Life is a series of natural and spontaneous changes. Don't resist them; that only creates sorrow. Let reality be reality. Let things flow naturally forward in whatever way they like. ~Lao Tzu

The snake which cannot cast its skin has to die. As well the minds which are prevented from changing their opinions; they cease to be mind. ~Friedrich Nietzsche

Stepping onto a brand-new path is difficult, but not more difficult than remaining in a situation, which is not nurturing to the whole [person].” ~Maya Angelou

Right now I want a word that describes the feeling that you get--a cold sick feeling, deep down inside--when you know something is happening that will change you, and you don't want it to, but you can't stop it. And you know, for the first time, for the very first time, that there will now be a *before* and an *after*, a *was* and a *will be*. And that you will never again quite be the same person you were. ~Jennifer Donnelly (*A Northern Light*)

Sometimes the slightest things change the directions of our lives, the merest breath of a circumstance, a random moment that connects like a meteorite striking the earth. Lives have swiveled and changed direction on the strength of a chance remark. ~Bryce Courtenay

Change is the end result of all true learning. ~Leo Buscaglia

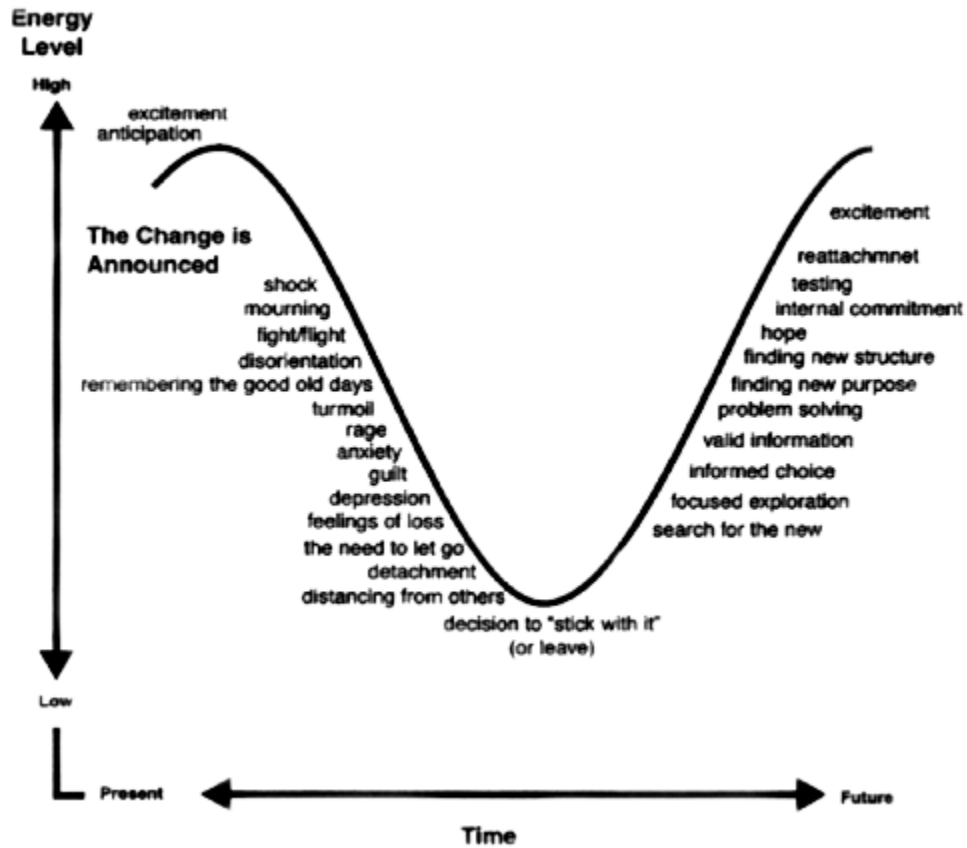
The changes we dread most may contain our salvation. ~Barbara Kingsolver

To change one's life: 1. Start immediately. 2. Do it flamboyantly. 3. No exceptions. ~William James

We would rather be ruined than changed. We would rather die in our dread than climb the cross of the moment and let our illusions die. ~W.H. Auden

The cloud is free only to go with the wind. The rain is free only in falling. ~Wendell Berry

The Roller Coaster of Change (Gil Rendle)



The Roller Coaster of Change

Adapted from [Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders](#), copyright © 1998 by the Alban Institute.

A helpful tool during a time of change is a descriptive lens called “the roller coaster of change.” Such a lens helps observers gather information about what a congregation (or some subgroup within the congregation) is experiencing by measuring where people are emotionally and by listening to the content of their feelings. From such a description, leaders can then strategize an appropriate response.

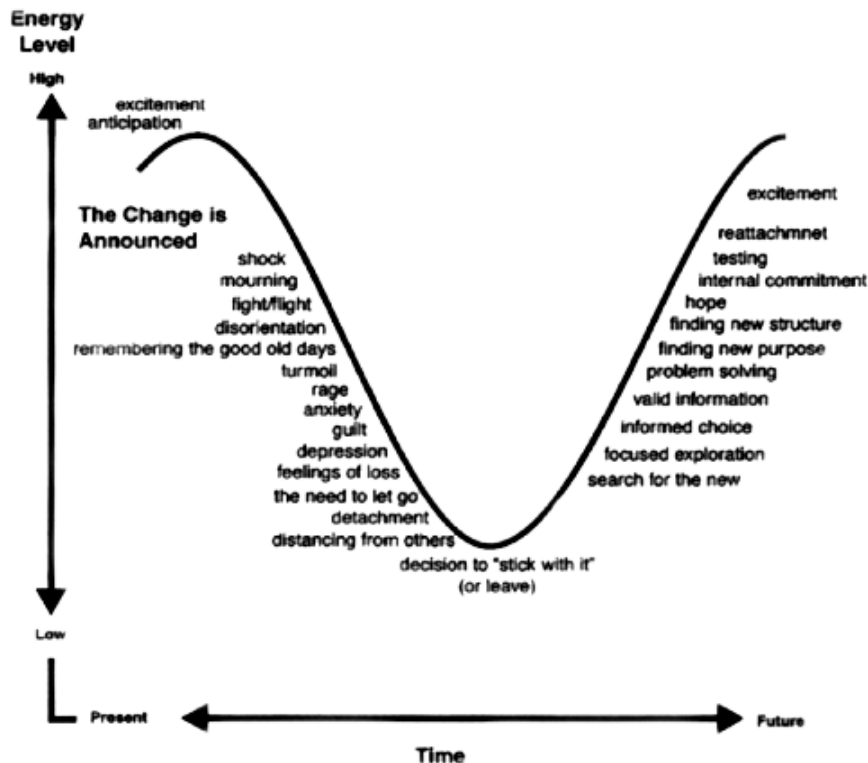
The roller coaster of change is a model that identifies a natural sequence of feelings and relationships that are a part of change. It was first adapted from Ralph G. Hirschowitz by Susan Hassinger, a United Methodist bishop.

A Game

Before you continue reading, take a few minutes to explore your own feelings during a time of change. Work either alone or with a leadership group.

1. Recall a time of great change in your life. It does not matter whether the change was positive and exciting (the birth of a child) or negative and difficult (a divorce or the loss of a job).
2. Begin at the point where you first received news of this change and begin to recall the feelings you experienced as you lived through the change.
3. With attention to the sequence in which you recall the feelings, list them on a sheet of newsprint.

The roller coaster of change shows a natural progression of feelings we experience in a time of change. And it also shows that the feelings we are experiencing and expressing may offer some indication of how far along we are in accepting and owning the change.



If you played the game above, compare your list of feelings to the roller coaster of change. Do your feelings correspond to or add to the feelings offered in the model? If you were able to identify any sequence of feelings you experienced, did they correlate with a sequence noted in the model? Of course, the model is not definitive; it does not include all the feelings someone may experience in a time of change. Nor is the sequence of feelings and reactions meant to suggest that there is a clear movement from feeling to feeling in the order listed. It does, however, offer insight into the types and groupings of feelings that will be experienced, and it shows that there is a general sequence of feelings.

Excitement

Notice in the roller coaster that when a change is announced, the first response may be one of increased energy and positive feelings. This is a fairly common experience whether or not the news of the change is anticipated and desired. When it is first announced that a baby is expected, wife, husband, and family all feel a great amount of anticipation and celebrate with great joy. When the congregational vote is announced and there is overwhelming support to proceed with building the new facility, there is celebration. But when more difficult news is announced, people have a similar initial response. When a serious disease is finally diagnosed, the response may well be, "Thank God, we finally know what we're dealing with. Let's get going and do something about this." When the vote is taken not to extend the call or contract of a staff person, the initial response may be, "Well, we now know what we have to do. Let's get busy with a staffing study so that we can call the next staff person and get this thing going again."

There is a bit of common wisdom in family systems theory that says that as the family confronts necessary changes, the family usually gets worse before it gets better. What is suggested in the roller coaster of change is the opposite. It often seems as if the congregational system gets better before it gets worse (and then better again). That is, the initial expressions of excitement or relief allow participants to be hopeful that they will be able to march through change untouched.

Leaders and members alike often become discouraged and disillusioned later as members of the congregational system begin to work through more difficult feelings. For example, following the initial excitement and acceptance of adding a new contemporary worship service to attract younger people from the community, clergy and music directors may be dismayed at the expressions of loss and anger members register about the changes in worship and music. Or leaders get upset with the number of complaints from long-term members about lack of attention to and reduced programs for older members. The leaders can recall these same members initially supporting the new programming and staffing priorities directed to youth when the retired visitation pastor moved to another community.

It is not uncommon for leaders and members to have a sense of betrayal or disappointment that things did not go smoothly after the initial response of people pulling together and the excitement of people wanting to see changes implemented. It is helpful and healthy for leaders to be aware of the positive energy that often begins the cycle of change. And leaders need to know that these positive feelings are naturally followed by more difficult feelings and a loss of energy. This information allows leaders to avoid feeling blindsided by the criticisms they will experience from the very same

people who initially offered support and expressed relief. Leaders can then interpret the changes in congregational attitudes to members who remember the initial enthusiasm and begin to worry that “we’re losing support” as the more difficult feelings begin to be expressed.

Significantly, leaders can depersonalize the criticisms and concerns they will hear. Being aware that the initial enthusiasm will run a natural cycle through some level of anger and depression helps leaders to be less personally sensitive to criticisms that will be leveled at them. And such awareness may help to alleviate some worry about having personally failed at leading the congregation in change.

Systems (such as congregations) naturally seek balance or equilibrium. This search for equilibrium is often experienced by leaders as resistance to the change they are seeking. In fact, as the cycle of feelings in the congregation runs from enthusiasm to anger or depression, many leaders interpret the shift as evidence of personal criticism from members or other leaders. Rather, the shift may be the natural workings of a healthy system seeking stability. Changing systems balance and stabilize themselves by using positive and negative feedback loops.

Feedback loops are the bits of information within the system (or congregation) that are used to keep internal fluctuations within acceptable and sustainable norms. “Positive” and “negative” as descriptors of feedback loops are not evaluative terms. They do not mean “good” and “bad” feedback loops. Rather a “positive” feedback loop is an “excitor.” It tells the system that it is too calm. It is like an alarm clock that tells you that you are too calm and inactive when you sleep and it is time to be up and moving. So it gives you positive—that is, stimulating—information. It is like the initial enthusiasm the congregation offers in response to an announced change that suggests, “Let’s get going!”

In contrast, a “negative” feedback loop is information that is introduced into the system to slow it down. It inhibits the change and acts like a speeding ticket. The most common response we have after receiving a speeding ticket is to slow down and to be very conscious of our speed. Similarly, the initial enthusiasm in the congregation about change will often be followed with more difficult feelings that will act as speeding tickets, that is, negative information that will slow the change down and try to restore a feeling of stability. By using both positive and negative feedback loops, the congregational system will try to keep itself intact and healthy as it rides the roller coaster of change.

An easy example of this is the rather common experience of tickling a baby. When you initially start to pay attention to the baby and tickle him or her, the baby laughs and giggles in response. The laughter is a positive feedback loop. The baby’s response gives you encouraging information that the play is pleasurable and that the baby wants you to continue. The laughter “excites” your participation in the play, and you continue to tickle and perhaps to laugh yourself. When the baby is overstimulated by your play, however, he or she will begin to cry. The tickling pleasure has reached its upper limit and is now being experienced as discomfort, and the baby immediately offers a negative feedback loop by crying. This clearly tells you to slow down. Our most natural instinct at that point is to hug and cuddle the baby to help him or her reestablish a feeling of comfort and stability.

In most cases the crying is not intentional resistance to your tickling, and it is not evidence that you have been bad or done something wrong by stimulating the baby. It is not information you necessarily need to personalize. But it is information. It tells you what the baby is experiencing and what the baby needs from you next. The emotional cycle of the congregation as it moves from excitement through depression and on provides, similarly, information. It is important for leaders to identify how they are feeling and how others in the congregation are feeling to help them know what the congregation needs from them next.