

September 17, 2006

“Between Trapezes”

Rev. James E. Grant

Three or four days ago I observed one of life’s little dramas. I saw a child crying outside one of the Cooperative Preschool rooms. She was hesitant and uncertain about leaving her Mother to join the other children in the class. That is a perfect symbol of the changes which mark September each year. I think on the same day we received a circular in the mail, with this front page message: “Autumn invites us to embrace change.” That’s the first time Ethan Allan has helped me with a sermon!

Autumn brings changes to families. For example, parents face the changes of their child entering kindergarten; with the wistful question, “Where did those five years go?” Or the youngest child goes away to college. Parents will no longer hear the refrigerator door opening and closing late at night. Family life changes abound—our children relocate across the country; or get married; then we become grandparents. Single people find partners in relationships which seem to have been “made in heaven” only to split-up. I need not catalogue these type changes.

Of course there are other life-passages which illustrate the changes which we all face. A family member is diagnosed with a life-threatening illness. We find ourselves, perhaps in middle-age becoming parents to our parents. Someone near and dear to us is taken ill and dies.

I am talking about personal changes; but there are also organizational changes. Liz just led us in a Dedication of religious education teachers as we begin a new year, with new teachers and new classrooms.

Sometimes these more personal changes occur against a background of more complex organizational change. Here is an example from my childhood. When I was nine or ten years old my Mother regularly sent me down the street to the grocery owned by Mr. Mullinax. She wrote her order on a scrap of paper. Mr. Mullinax filled the order and placed the groceries in a paper bag, which I placed in my wagon to pull home. Mr. Mullinax kept his accounts in pencil on a small pad he carried in his shirt pocket. I have only a vague idea of how my parents paid for the groceries.

Mr. Mullinax was a member of our church, in fact was the tenor soloist in the choir. He knew our family. There was never any question about grocery orders or payment.

However, due to the illness of my Father, our family faced an economic crisis. We gradually began buying groceries from the A&P supermarket where prices were better. The A&P may have had better prices, to say nothing of more selection but it was also much less personal. Cash was paid for groceries, no penciled accounts. The cashiers were friendly, but did not know us as did Mr. Mullinax.

You get the point. As Gail Sheehy says in *Passages*, these kinds of changes have us moving from the hard shell of a more protective structure to something new where we can stretch. One of my “stretching” memories from A&P is a Jane Parker Spanish Bar Cake, a dessert treat unheard of in the neighborhood grocery.

We all face the kinds of changes I’ve mentioned. These transitions bring vulnerability but also opportunity. Gail Sheehy’s “crustacean” metaphor is not only applicable to individuals and family groupings but also to organizations, including congregations.

I began by sharing an observation of a little child entering pre-school. During the brief life of that child, this Congregation has also gone through a period of change, some of which seems to be more chaos than change. When I began thinking about this sermon, I realized just how much change has occurred here in only five years.

Tom and Carolyn retired; then two years of interim ministry, with three different ministers; during that time the Meeting House was being remodeled so that worship was held in Bard Hall; then we called a new settled Minister, Arvid Straube; Julie Kain came to be Associate Minister, for two years, then a new Associate Minister, Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, was called. Marjorie became ill, so that I am filling-in until she can come. During five or six years we have had seven different ministers. I am the eighth; talk about change! Yesterday afternoon I received an email from Marjorie. She indicated her recovery seems to be progressing and she “hopes to get a good word from her doctors and arrive sooner rather than later.”

In addition to changes in staff, during this same period the Congregation has been dealing with organizational change. The organizational change began in 2002, when Marge Wurgel, then Board President, introduced the idea of a new style of church governance. In December 2002, The Board voted unanimously to begin researching what we call the Empowered Organization, this was long before the Search Committee had even met Candidates to become our Lead Minister.

In 2003, the Search Committee was charged to communicate to candidates interested in becoming our Lead Minister that the church was moving toward this new style of organization, which we now know as the Empowered Congregation complete with ministry teams.

Following this Service there will be an opportunity for you to learn more about this new organizational structure in a question-answer and comment session in here in the Meeting House. Rev. Straube and members of the Board and Governance Team will be there to hear your comments and respond to your questions.

We need to remember that not everyone here is aware of all these changes. We will welcome forty-eight new members in a few Sundays. Their lives have been marked by the kinds of individual changes I've mentioned, but they have not lived through the organizational changes which have confronted those of us who have been here for some time.

So how do we deal with change—whether in our personal lives, our family lives, our church life, our work life—wherever? William Bridges refers to these times of change as being “between trapezes.” Bridges has written two books about transitions. The first, a best seller about 22 years ago was entitled, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*. In that book Bridges talked about how people may deal with the changes we all face in our lives.

As often happens, Bridges the prophet, had to deal with change himself. His second book *The Way of Change* is much more personal, dealing with the death of his wife and the beginnings of a new relationship. In this book, a portion of which was read by Victoria a few minutes ago, Bridges deals with personal change and organizational change. Change can be seen as a time of chaos. The trapeze artist has to let go of one trapeze while reaching for the next. That's great for the practiced trapeze artist, but what about the rest of us. Is there a way to think about change which is more positive than using the term chaos?” I suggest a more positive approach to the changes we face in life. One possibility to think of change as development. Here's what Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley wrote: “...experience with a life-threatening illness has given me new perspectives on ministry..” Just think of the difference if one says, “My life is marked by change.” Or “My life is marked by development.” To develop is the opposite of to envelop. An

envelope was originally a wrapping. A message or parcel was rolled up or wrapped in fabric. When the enveloped parcel or message was opened it was developed. Changes, whether personal or organizational provide a perfect way to “push the envelope,” to develop.

Bridges describes this kind of development in this way. “The path of development is a fishtailing course we follow as we let go of what we have been and then discover a new thing to become.” No matter if the change is planned or unplanned, we have an opportunity to unroll what has been rolled up in old habits, old ways of thinking.

Bridges uses the metaphor of development to talk about transition. Gail Sheehy uses the metaphor of a crustacean—think of a lobster—which in order to grow has to shed its old, protective hard shell.

We are not the first people who have had trouble dealing with transitions. The Jewish scriptures tell the story of the escape of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt. That story is filled with change and resistance. They had just escaped when they found themselves at a tidal estuary, the Reed Sea with Pharaoh’s army was closing in behind. They began to complain to Moses, their Leader. Moses, said, “Get moving.” There is a Midrash which says that the water did not recede until the first Israelite dared to step ahead. Later on, in the same story, the Israelites were having a kind of “field day” picnic at Mount Horeb—the Holy Mountain. Indeed they were having such a good time that they didn’t want to leave. Moses gave them God’s message: “You have hanged about this mountain long enough; get going!”

In that story of escape, there seems to be no distinction made between change caused by threat and change called by idleness. The same message applies: “Go forward.” The only way to escape to freedom is to move. However for the ancient Israelites and for us the “going forward” is not always easy. Even when they were at the very edge of the Promised Land of Freedom, they rebelled, some of them even complained they would have been better off to stay in slavery in Egypt. They became frightened by their prospects, their expectations.

That story is our story. One of the reasons we find transitions so hard has to do with expectations. Here’s an illustration from the contemporary author, Mary Morris. In her book, *Nothing to Declare: Memories of a Woman Traveling Alone*, she says “Expectation is one of the great sources of suffering.” She is writing about a trip she made through inland Mexico. At one point she was traveling toward a rural village, which she expected to be quaint and picturesque and romantic. What she found was simply a dull, dusty village.

Expectations work in many ways. Sometimes we, like Mary Morris, build up something in our minds, and then reality brings us disappointment. Sometimes we expect something bad and have a hard time accepting the good. There is a little known quotation from Christian Scripture, “According to your faith be it done to you.” (Matthew 9:29) Too often the way we deal with life’s changes has more to do with our expectations than anything else.

Several years ago I read an article about the expectations people have when they go to Broadway plays. Here is a sentence from that article:

“...people go to the theater...to be confirmed in their perceptions and values, to be consoled (a form of confirmation) and to have their lives re-stated, so to speak, and not be exposed to ...potential change.”

(Richard Gilman, “Do People Go to the Theater to be Changed?” *The New York Times*, September 1983, section 2, page 2)

The same can be true in the theater called life, or the theater called Congregation. If we go through life expecting every experience to confirm our previous perceptions; if that is our expectation, we will fail to grasp opportunities. We created a self-fulfilling prophecy. We expect something and then usually, perhaps subconsciously, make those expectations come true.

Long ago, I heard one of my mentors say that the great temptation of religion is the romantic temptation to live in a world that either never was or is long since passed. To illustrate his point, he quoted Heinrich Heine who said that years ago the University of Gottingen annually appointed two officials to be sure no new ideas were smuggled into the university.” (Carlyle Marney, *Priests to each Other*, p.104)

There is a human propensity to nostalgia, to long for the supposedly “good old days” which really were never as good as we remember. Nostalgic longing comes at the expense of a vibrant life today. We have a tendency to get locked into the womb of some previous experience. We all do it. I find myself too frequently illustrating a point by talking about how a church I used to serve did something.

The crustacean, or person, or congregation which refuses to lose its shell will not grow, and will settle for mediocrity. We will not find the freedom of development so long as we are content to be enveloped. Of course this is not easy.

Betty and I are returning to South Carolina next month for a reunion with people who I knew when I was a campus minister, over forty years ago. I find myself doing the old “comparison game.” Will they know me? Well, I’ve less hair and more stomach than I did then. What will they think about my leaving my Baptist background to become Unitarian Universalist? If I allow myself to play these mind games I may have a mediocre experience or worse still, may talk myself out of going to the reunion.

Each of us faces transitions in our personal life; and every congregation I’ve ever known which thrived faced transitions in its congregational life. A key component in how we deal with these transitions has to do with our expectations and our willingness to be free.

You probably remember Robert Frost’s poem about standing at a junction of two roads, and deciding which one to take. One road was well-worn and seems to be the one most taken. Most people did not want to take the less-traveled road. Their motto might have been, “Come weal or come woe, my status is quo.”

The other road, the one Frost’s traveler took was not used as much, “less traveled by...”
“I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.” (Robert Frost, “The Road Not Taken”)

Our willingness to be open to the possibilities of change will “make all the difference” in our lives. May it be so. Amen.