

Change, Renewal, and Hope

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As I approached the subject of renewal, I found renewal regularly associated with change and hope. Change appeared often as an antecedent effect motivating renewal and hope as a subsequent effect growing from renewal. I was unable to find the material I wanted from a single source. In addition, I began to see renewal in a number of different forms and different circumstances. Thus, I have woven together material from one primary source, several other sources, and added some of my own experiences and thinking as well.

Considering the aftermath of our most recent elections, there are some people in this country who have responded with joy and others with feelings of foreboding. In either case, people need to deal as effectively as possible with the electoral reality and the change that it represents. I believe that both joy and foreboding are best served by starting with oneself. One needs to take care of oneself at least part of the time if one is to be most effective in dealing with the needs of others or with different situations in one's life. In the winter issue of UU World Magazine, Rev. Peter Morales addressed one facet of this idea in his article entitled "Renew Your Spirit". He notes,

I urge you to make some space to reflect on what your Spirit needs right now. We Unitarian Universalists claim to have a lot of theological diversity. Yet every UU I have ever known, whether that person is a humanist, theist, pagan, Christian, or Buddhist – or refuses all labels – shares a core conviction. We all believe that things do not have to be the way they are. We have refused to accept that inequality, hatred, environmental destruction, racism, and war are inevitable parts of the human condition. We believe that we can make things better, especially when we act together.

Historically, many religions have taught the opposite. They have taught that we are to accept our lot in life, that we deserve to suffer, and that things are the way they are because of predestination, Original Sin, karma, or some such. Religions have taught that the earthly powers that shape our world have divine sanction. They have taught that kings and queens have their power by divine right, or that the Emperor or chief is God.

Why, then, are we UUs convinced that things need not be the way they are? We believe it because we have experienced life's possibilities. We have experienced love, beauty, joy, friendship, and a peace that transcends our understanding. We have all had some variety of spiritual experience of mystical connection. (What is love if not connection?)

We need to remember. When we witness brutality, injustice, the stupidity of our politics, heartless human exploitation by the economically powerful, and the one-time devastation of nature – when we find ourselves becoming bitter, we need to remind ourselves of our most treasured experiences.

Actually we need to do more than remember. We need to experience life's gifts and possibilities once more. Renewing contact with what is most precious in life is really a spiritual practice. It is an essential practice. If we do not feed our spirits they will wither. Even the good deeds we strive to do will become acts of anger and joyless obligation rather than efforts to share and to heal.

We all need to ask ourselves, “What does my spirit need right now?” Perhaps it is a quiet time in nature. Maybe a visit to a new exhibition in a museum. How about some time in the garden? Why not attend the concert by a favorite artist, or take a walk with an old friend? The possibilities go on and on.

Even better, how about creating something rather than being passive? Play some music. Sing in a chorus. Paint or sculpt again. Knit or quilt or sew. (I've always marveled at how many UUs knit.) Cook up something new and special. Play with a child. Now and then we all need to visit the world we are trying to create.

There is a part of me that feels guilty and self – indulgent when I do things that I enjoy and that feed my spirit. There are always articles or sermons to write, people to call, meetings to attend, emails to answer, projects to move forward. Yet deep down, I know better. Just as practices such as prayer and meditation give us clarity and strength to re–engage with the world, so to do other practices that get us in touch with what is most precious.

I urge you – yes, you – to make some space to reflect on what your Spirit needs right now. Deep down you know: we all do. Our deepest longings will guide us. Make space for beauty and love and play. Let your spirit heal and soar.

When our spirits are strong and reconnected, our work for compassion and justice has enduring power. When our spirits are renewed, we are blessings to one another and to the world.

For me then, as Rev. Morales suggests, if we do not renew ourselves, we cannot be as complete or as effective participants in renewal with others whatever the circumstances.

A number of years ago I was involved with a young couple who cared for each other very much. Despite their best efforts, the time came that they needed to part. I wrote the following having witnessed their journey. I titled it, “In Any Relationship”.

In any relationship be honest with yourself and then you can be honest with the other. Then, if one day you find it best to go your separate ways, you can do what needs to be done, not with enmity, but with genuineness and in good faith, albeit not without pain at times. At least it's an honest pain, not one of dishonesty or guilt. It is also a pain from which you can heal without having to look back wondering if you gave it your best shot.

In their relationship the change was the need to separate. Both of them grieved the loss of their relationship. And, in time, they both renewed the view of their lives and found hope in the new paths they had chosen. Both of their new paths began with self reflection in order for renewal to begin and move forward.

My belief is that relationship can apply in a number of different ways including with oneself, with others, with experiences, and with events. Consider Spring. On March 15th I saw the first crocus in our backyard. The very next day I saw a group of a half a dozen new crocuses. At the same time I noticed that our backyard was free of snow and ice for the first time in a long time. Of course this brought with it an increase in mud generated by an increase in temperatures. Other spring-like things began to happen like dirty cars and the appearance of potholes. They may not be of nature but they sure seem to be as regular as some natural events. We have to renew our ability to dodge potholes and not slip in the mud. Our hope begins to be for dry ground

and filled in potholes. These may seem mundane hopes, but they are just as real as anything else in our world.

We may also consider that losses bring change whether we want it or not. Renewal occurs almost because we have no other choice. Many times people think of losses only in terms of death. However, losses can be due to far less intense changes. How do we readjust if we don't lose the weight we want to? What if hoped-for outcomes are not achieved? For example, human skin cells are renewing all the time due to normal changes in the body. How realistic would it be for me at almost 73 years old to hope for the smooth skin with the lack of liver spots of a 25 year old? My realistic hope is that my skin continues to reproduce. So far so good.

One loss that I hope never to experience is my sense of humor. Mine has been known to go into hiding at times considering some experiences I've had in my life. However, I have been able to find it again so far. I am told that Marian Anderson, the great opera singer, literally grew up in a tarpaper shack. She is supposed to been told by her mother that she might feel that she had lost everything at times, but that she had not lost everything until she lost her sense of humor. I think that when particularly difficult changes occur in our lives, renewal and hope are significantly aided by humor. I think I learned this from my Dad. At one point he had small stroke which affected his motor skills on his right side and he was right handed.

At one point he was eating a meal while he was at the nursing home and he was using his left hand. He said, "You know. This left hand is the only thing between me and starvation." He was essentially a born-again atheist. So on another occasion we were discussing what he wanted us to do with his ashes upon his death. He said, "Just throw them into a dumpster. They're just going to turn into compost anyway." We actually buried him next to my Mom, but you get the idea.

Change, renewal, and hope do not necessarily have to be associated with negative circumstances. I was taking a new friend on a day hike to a lake in the wilderness area. I took a wrong turn and became lost for a while or, as Daniel Boone is reputed to have said, "I was not lost. I became confused for a while." The point is that I was in the mountains doing what I loved and experienced this change of events. I'll admit I was a motivated to renew my map reading and compass skills. At the same time, I always had the hope that I would find a way out and I did.

On the other hand, I know that there are changes that are so awful that the process of renewal seems so unbearable in its weight and so interminable in its length of time that one may be led to feel hopeless. This is where the love of family and friends can help one to bear some of the burden. The pain is inescapable at least for a while. If one persists on the journey of renewal, the light of hope can and will begin to appear over the horizon.

In conclusion, I will quote Scott Russell Sanders from his book, "Hunting For Hope."

Hope is like a memory in its action: memory grips the past and hope grips the future. Yes, I thought, hope and memory are kindred powers binding together the scraps of time. We compose the stories of our lives by casting thought backward and forward, remembering and anticipating.

May it be so.

Readings

We must always change, renew, rejuvenate ourselves; otherwise, we harden.

Johann Wolfgang Goethe

It is not so much for its beauty that the forest makes a claim upon men's hearts, as for that subtle something, that quality of air, that emanation from old trees, that's so wonderfully ... renews a weary spirit.

Robert Louis Stevenson

There is nothing like a newborn baby to renew your Spirit – and to buttress your resolve to make the world a better place.

Virginia Kelley