Sermon: “Change is Inevitable – Growth is Optional”  
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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Huntington, NY  
Rev. Nancy O. Arnold

Well – here we are. We’ve all experienced significant changes in the last month. I left my job as a hospice chaplain with Visiting Nurse Service, and my position as Pastoral Care Minister for the Bay Shore congregation. You said farewell to your beloved minister of more than seven years. And then you said farewell to a dear friend and member of the Fellowship the day after the grand party you hosted for Rev. Paul’s retirement. Many of you are still saying good-bye.

Change. The word is enough to make some people shudder in anticipation – like waiting for the other shoe to drop. For others, it’s the juice that makes life most interesting. No matter what your feelings, there is one truth about change: change is a certainty in life. It is one of the few constants. How we choose to respond to – or resist – change, determines what transformations take place in our own lives.

Change and transformation are not the same thing. Change is often something inflicted upon us from the outside. The loss of a job, the death of a loved one, the loss of a minister – these are changes we would not normally welcome. They are imposed on us by something – or some one – outside ourselves.

Then there is the kind of change that we do determine for ourselves – for the good of our own lives. Something is not quite right in our lives, so we reflect and try to discern the source of the discomfort. We may change some behaviors or habits in an effort to alleviate the discomfort. If that doesn’t create the desired change, we may decide to do something more dramatic – like get a divorce, move to a new locale, or leave a job.

I have done all of those things in my life. By far, the hardest decisions I have ever made were the ones to leave one ministry to move on to something else. I dearly love the people I serve, whether in a congregation or a hospital bed.

The decision to leave one ministry for another was not made lightly. I don’t like change. I don’t like causing pain for other people – especially people for whom I care deeply. I don’t like making decisions that impact other people so I carefully weigh all the options. I will try everything I can think of to avoid hurting those I love. But sometimes, even the small internal changes we make are not enough to ease the discomfort of a situation for ourselves.

And that is where I found myself once again. Working as a hospice chaplain was very rewarding, but it was no longer a manageable job for me to be doing.

That was where I found myself in 2007 as well. For years I had worked to make changes in how I handled my job as minister of a mid-size congregation. I attended training workshops and conferences, and I worked with a consultant to get a better grasp of what my role in the church should be. Some progress was made in changing my work habits and the ways in which the leadership and I divided up tasks.

And then my mother became ill in the fall of 2005. There was no question in my mind that I would care for her during her final illness. The Akron congregation was kind and gracious enough to grant me family leave to be able to do that. I returned to my work at the church after a three month absence. The leadership encouraged me to resume my ministerial responsibilities gradually. Even with a gradual re-entry process, it was difficult for me to be fully present. With every funeral I conducted – and there were five in as many months after my mother’s death – I was the grieving daughter who was burying her parents once again.
Before this, I had always been the one to guide others through their grief. Now I was continuing to offer such comfort to others while attempting to mend my own broken heart. Here is what I learned from this experience: Grief is the conflicting feelings caused by a change or an end in a familiar pattern of behavior. Grief is the feeling of reaching out for someone who has always been there… only to discover when I need her one more time, she is no longer there.

My mother’s illness was a change in my life that I never would have invited. None of us would. But life is about change, and life happens. As I cared for my mother until her death in March 2006, I felt as if I was in exactly the right place, at the right time, doing what I was meant to do – perhaps for the first time in my life. I returned from that time with my mother transformed. I had learned the difference between doing what I was called to do, and doing what I am capable of doing.

I suspect that many of us do not embrace change willingly. We resist. We barter. We deny. And then we change. Whether or not we change for the better, is up to us.

Early in the church year after my mother’s death, I shared with someone the struggle I was having just trying to stay afloat. I explained that I was seeing a variety of helping professionals to cope with my grief and still do my job. He said to me: “Every time I come to you with a problem, you always send me off by saying – trust your gut. You don’t need all those professionals to tell you what you know. You know what you need.”

That was the most helpful advice I could have received. That night, before going to sleep, I set the intention to trust that I would know what I needed. When I awakened in the morning, the answer was clear. I knew it was time to leave the Akron church.

Not being someone who gives up easily, I continued to try to make adjustments in how I did my work. I hoped that small changes would allow me to stay, and still grow in the new ways to which I was being drawn.

Here’s what I’ve learned: when you deny what you know, and try to make do with an untenable situation, you still change – only not necessarily for the better.

Integrity is my highest value. It is very important to me to be authentic and true to myself. I know from experience, that if I don’t like the person I am becoming, then it’s time to do something different.

That is where I found myself five years ago. And that is where I found myself last year when I was treated for breast cancer. The decision to leave hospice chaplaincy and return to full-time parish work was – and is – about what I need to be doing for the growth of my soul. From all my experience with change, I discerned that guiding a congregation through the transition process between settled ministries seemed like a good fit. I am fortunate that your Interim Search Committee seemed to agree. I am very grateful to be here among all of you.

Like people, congregations often face decisions that necessitate change. From the conversations I have had thus far, I know that reactions to Paul’s retirement have been mixed, especially if this is the first time you are experiencing a change in ministerial leadership. You may be thinking things like:

Oh, no, what will happen to us?
I can’t imagine this Fellowship without Paul in it.
I’m heartbroken.
I’m happy for Paul, but I didn’t want him to leave.
I don’t want things to change.
This makes me really anxious.
This makes me really sad.
I don’t know what to say.
What does this mean for our congregation?

These reactions are the conflicting feelings caused by a change or an end to a familiar pattern of behavior. It is an indication of the grief that is present when we experience a loss or change – any loss or change. Grief touches grief. When we experience a new loss or change, we grieve all the losses and changes we’ve ever known, all over again.

My initial reaction to change is fear – fear of the unknown. That is why I often stay too long in situations that aren’t healthy for me.

There is no correct response to change. Our reactions are all correct, because they are genuinely ours. As we move through this transition process, I encourage you to share your reactions with me and with each other. That is the level of trust from which we operate in our UU congregations. We listen to each other, and we take care of each other. For as long as we are here together.

After her first book, *A Return to Love*, was published, Marianne Williamson’s life was forever changed by its success. She received more money than she had ever seen, and started thinking that she should buy a house. But she prayed about it and the guidance that emerged was “Redecorate your condo.” People around her laughed at the idea. Why would she redecorate her condo when she could afford to buy a house? She writes:

In the greater scheme of things, whether or not you purchase a house is not what matters. But it matters indeed when the voice in our heart loses volume in your head.
Why was [I being directed] to redecorate my condo? Because I needed time to adjust to the new turn my life had taken. I needed time to grow into my new circumstances, to inhabit emotionally the space I was already inhabiting materially. I needed time to think about what things meant and how to deal with new situations in the most mature way.
Sometimes change lifts you up like a tornado and puts you down somewhere you’ve never been before. Tornadoes are fast, and they are also destructive. Speed can be the enemy of constructive change.

Another reason I was being inwardly directed to remain in my condo, I think, was in order to say good-bye. I needed to say good-bye to parts of myself that were being called to transform into something new, and I needed to say hello to parts of myself that were being born… (from *The Gift of Change* by Marianne Williamson)

I’ve been told that in Chinese, the symbol for change is the combination of the characters “crisis” and “opportunity.” “Every change is a challenge to become who we really are,” Williamson writes. And “Every problem implies a question: Are you ready to embody what you say you believe?” How we respond to situations that present themselves determines what spiritual transformation will take place.

That’s the spiritual meaning of every situation: not what happens to us, but what we do with what happens to us and who we decide to become because of what happens to us. The only real failure is the failure to grow from what we go through. (Marianne Williamson, *The Gift of Change*, p. 6)
Change is inevitable. Growth is optional. Change, though uncomfortable, presents us with opportunities. Williamson says that

Every experience we go through is a mirror… every situation provides an opportunity to change our thoughts, create new energies, and respond differently. (Interview with Marianne Williamson by Maureen McDonald, freelance Detroit journalist)

This congregation is already in a process of discernment that will continue at least until you call your next settled minister. During our time together we will be answering the questions: “Who are we? Where did we come from? And, where are we going?” We will have many opportunities to address these questions in the next months. But I invite you to start thinking about them now.

It is very important during times of great change to focus on the things that don’t change. We need a compass during times of transition. We need something that binds us emotionally to a steady and firm course. We need to be reminded that we are still people – or congregations – that have a greater purpose. This gives “us the strength to make positive changes, the wisdom to endure negative changes, and the capacity to become people in whose presence the world moves toward healing.” (Marianne Williamson, the Gift of Change)

Our compass these next months will be found in each other, and in the support we receive from the UUA and Metro New York District. But I urge you to listen to each other and to what you already know. Professionals can be helpful in offering some steps to achieve your goal – calling your next minister. But no one knows better than you what this congregation needs. Trust your gut. You know what you need.

Although I’ve only been with you for a few days, the members with whom I’ve spoken have a positive attitude about how we can use our time together these next few months. You are already managing this change as an opportunity for growth. I believe that you will emerge even more committed to this faith and to this Fellowship than ever before. Perhaps even transformed by the experience.

It may help you to know that the Akron congregation and I moved through our respective transitions. We all grew from this experience. The congregation did some of the work it needed to do before welcoming a new minister. It took the perspective of an interim minister to change the thinking, create new energies, and allow people to respond differently. The congregation continues its process of spiritual transformation with its new settled minister.

The same can be said for me. Since leaving the Akron church I cleared space in my life for different things. In 2008 I moved back to my native New York and began a new ministry as a hospice chaplain. I completed a Certificate program in Spiritual Direction at Fordham University. As a Spiritual Director I walk with others through their life transitions, providing support and focus. It was this discernment process with others that led to my awareness that, once again, it was time for me to do something else. I continue to sort through decades of accumulated mementoes which allow me to do the internal sorting I need as we begin our interim ministry together.

Transformation is not without some pain. I still miss interacting with the hospice patients and staff, the members of the Akron church, and now the Bay Shore congregation. I suspect they miss me as well. But I feel good about how we ended our respective relationships. We were very present to each other, just as you were for Rev. Paul. We laughed together, mourned
together, and celebrated together a lot. Perhaps most importantly, we responded to the change in relationship as an opportunity for growth.

And that’s why I’m here with you for a limited period of time. For my part, I want to be as present to you as I can during these next months. I look forward to laughing together, mourning together, and celebrating together with you. And when the time comes for us to say “good-bye,” you will move forward with faith in your ability to be transformed by the new opportunities that will await you with your next settled minister. That is my hope. That is my plan.

So may it be.