

## Loss and Gain

preached by the Rev. Colin Bossen at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Cleveland,  
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There once was a great king in the East who charged the wisest of his advisors to give him a gift that would make him happy when he was sad and sad when he was happy. For many months, the wise advisor struggled with what he should give the king. Finally, he appeared in court and said, "Sire, I have a gift that will make you happy when you are sad and sad when you are happy."

The king asked, "What is it?"

"It is a simple gold ring with the words 'This too shall pass' inscribed on the band," the advisor replied.

The king sat silently for a few minutes. Then he said to his advisor, "Indeed you have given me a gift that will make me happy when I am sad and sad when I am happy. I realize now that despite all my wealth and wisdom someday I will be dust. And the next time I am in pain I will look at the ring and remember that my pain is transitory."

Most of you have probably heard this parable before. It is variously attributed to Jewish and Sufi sources. Sometimes the king in it is named as King Solomon but in most versions he is simply anonymous.

The point of the parable is clear. Change is inevitable. Our lives are transitory. As the sage of Ecclesiastes reminds us, "A season is set for everything," or as the Greek philosopher Heraclitus would have it, "Nothing endures but change."

I remember when I became fully aware of the transitory nature of existence. I was in sixth grade. It was early autumn and I was riding the bus to school. The bus route went by a cemetery. One morning as we passed it I found myself thinking of my Grandfather Morrie. He died when I was a toddler. With the exception of one memory so vague I am unsure whether it was from a dream or real life, everything I know about him is from stories my father and my aunts and uncles shared.

As a child, he occupied a place in my imagination rather than a place in my memory. I knew that he immigrated from the Ukraine when he was small. I was told that my great aunt Claire pushed him in a cart from a tiny village outside Odessa to Amsterdam. When I was very young the only cart I could imagine was a grocery cart. Even now, an impossible image sticks with me. I picture my grandfather bundled in blankets and sitting in a shopping basket while my aunt pushes him down a tree-line European dirt road.

That morning I realized that my grandfather's experiences had been just as real to him as mine were to me. He had had a childhood, gotten married, had children, watched his children grow and died. Most likely, I understood, my life would follow a similar course. Someday I would change from being a living person to someone remembered only in stories.

So it is true with all of us. Each of us, as Ecclesiastes says, has "A time for being born and a time for dying." This truth is captured poignantly in much of the world's great art and literature. When I think of it I often think of Allen Ginsberg's poem "On Neal Ashes" about the writer, and Ginsberg's sometime lover, Neal Cassady. "Delicate eyes that blinked blue Rockies all ash / nipples, Ribs I touched w/ my thumb are ash... / all ashes, all ashes again." Such words are a reminder that all living matter is destined to become inert.

A central function of religion is to help us adjust to the reality of change. Religion and religious community can give us a sense of continuity and stability. Most religions, Unitarian Universalism included, have traditions that stretch back hundreds, if not thousands, of years. The regular repetition of ritual and the practice of gathering together week after week offers us mechanisms for processing the changes in our lives. Through prayer or meditation we can acknowledge and give voice to our feelings about the changes we face. The fellowship we share reminds us that throughout the changes in our lives we are never truly alone. Each of us is connected to each other and the universe that surrounds us.

Change happens on five scales: individual, social, ecological, geological and cosmic. These scales increase in complexity, geography and temporality from the individual to the cosmic.

Individual change is located within the single individual and takes place within the span of a lifetime. It is what happens to me, the change that I experience: my birth, my graduation from high school or my change of a career. It is this kind of change that most of us are preoccupied with. It is the change we experience most directly. Changes on all other scales remain largely abstract unless they intersect with our individual experiences.

Social change overlaps with individual change. It is a shift in human relations. Such a shift can occur between two people, when they meet and become friends, for instance, or between two nations. An economic recession, the advent of a new technology, marriage, war and a peace treaty are all forms of social change. Social changes take place over spans of time ranging from a few days or months to several generations. All the changes that take place within our congregation are forms of social change.

Most of the change we experience in our lives take place on either the individual or the social scales. The remaining three kinds of change are difficult to observe and imagine. They usually take place over many generations or eons. Some play out on scales so vast they encompass all of known existence and all time. Against such changes we are, in the words of naturalist Loren Eiseley, "frail and perishable brains... [on a] passage through eternity... like a moth among the arc lights..."

Ecological change occurs on levels varying between a local ecosystem and the entire planet. At a minimum this kind of change has to effect the entire local population of a species. At a maximum it impacts all life on Earth. The extinction of a single species is a kind of ecological change. The destruction of an ecosystem or change in the Earth's climate is another. Such changes almost always transcend the span of a single human life.

Geological change is something we rarely witness. It is the movement of the continents and changes to the planet itself. A dramatic earthquake or the explosion of a volcano might remind us of its presence. The scale of time it occurs on is such that until a few generations ago most

humans thought the world to be static. It was not until the beginning of the 20th century that the geophysicist Alfred Wegner proposed the theory of continental drift.

Cosmic change takes place on an even vaster scale. The birth and destruction of planets, stars and solar systems play out over periods of time long enough that as species we are not always aware of them. Supernovas occur rarely enough that the last one in the Milky Way was observed more than four hundred years ago. The birth and death of the cosmos itself takes place on a time scale of a hundred billion years. A scale so vast is beyond true human reckoning. It exists not in lived experience but in mathematics and the imagination.

We respond to changes on each scale differently. Changes on the largest scales are such that some deny they exist. Ironically, it is the changes on the smallest scales—the individual and the social—that we respond to most strongly; a humble reminder of the small place we each play in the universe.

No matter the scale, the sheer dynamism of life should remind us that we face constant change. And confronted with this reality we each have to answer the questions: Will I cling to what has been? Or will I accept what soon will be? How much control, if any, do I have over this change that I am now confronted with? The enduring nature of these questions is perhaps what prompted Reinhold Niebuhr to pen his famous serenity prayer: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Whether or not you believe in God, Niebuhr’s advice is sound. We have very limited control. We are not the masters of our destinies. We do not even determine all of the changes that happen to us as individuals. Most of us do not choose when or how we die. And the great events in our lives, who we choose as our life partners, for instance, are often as much due to chance as our own volition. Our ability to influence change on a social scale is even less than our ability to influence it on an individual scale. Collectively a community or our species might impact ecological change but the geological and cosmic are beyond human power.

In the 1960s the psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross wrote a famous book "On Death and Dying" that illuminates the greatest individual change that any of us will face: the passage from life to death. In her book Kubler-Ross identifies five stages that people go through when faced with a terminal illness. These are denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Kubler-Ross's stages are useful in understanding our responses to any kind of change. Each change we face is a form of death, what has been passes away.

Kubler-Ross teaches that the task of the community for the individual faced with change is to help that person move from denial to acceptance. If possible, the community can help the person facing change maintain a sense of hope throughout. For the terminally ill hope can range from a hope for a cure to hope for a painless death. In other situations, hope may be the hope for our own agency or for a change in the larger systems of which we are a part.

The unseasonably warm weather of the last month has had me thinking about Kubler-Ross’s five stages in relation to climate change. I am one of those people who follows the wide scientific consensus and accepts climate change as reality. I have come to realize that convincing climate

change deniers of the truth of climate change is a pastoral task. They have to be helped move from denial, through anger, bargaining, depression and onto acceptance. This challenge is much like the challenge a chaplain or doctor faces with a terminally ill patient who denies the reality of his or her illness.

The proper response is not to meet denial with anger or with reason. It is instead to greet it with compassion. Most terminally ill people want to be listened to for, as Kubler-Ross writes, "death itself is not the problem, but... the accompanying sense of hopelessness, helplessness and isolation [are]."

Most climate change deniers, I suspect, have feelings of helplessness and hopelessness that they are trying to deny by recognizing that our planet, or at least our way of life, is terminally ill. Accepting that climate change is real means accepting that we have to make changes to how we produce and consume energy, what we eat and where we live. For many people it is easier to live in denial than to face such dramatic shifts in their way of life.

Much of the debate on climate change takes place on the political rather than the personal level. Despite the rhetoric of some conservatives, compassion does not have a large place in our nation's political discourse. The media is not geared towards the type of genuine engagement that compassion requires. It is hard for me to picture someone like Al Gore engaging with a climate change denier like Rick Perry on a pastoral level. Can you imagine Gore publicly asking Perry, "So, Rick, how do the record droughts in Texas make you feel?"

Helping people move from denial to acceptance in the face of change is difficult. The task becomes more challenging when the scale increases. Most people are uncomfortable with change. The idea that the universe and the planet are not static systems but dynamic ones threatens the psychological scaffolding that many people have created to help them deal with the changes in their own lives. If everything is in flux then the fluxes of an individual life are minor compared to those on the ecological, geological and cosmic scales.

I find Taoist teachings to be helpful when personally wrestling with this reality. This morning Rina told the Taoist story of the farmer and the horse. Each time the farmer in the story is confronted with a change he accepts it rather than decides that it is good or bad. Having a healthy son, for instance, might not be such a good thing if the army comes to draft him.

The Taoist message is to accept the changing nature of reality. It can help move one from denial to acceptance. As one verse in the Tao Te Ching partially reads:

If you realize that all things change,  
there is nothing you will try to hold on to.  
If you aren't afraid of dying,  
there is nothing you can't achieve.

Our lives change from one minute to the next. We shift from the state of waking to that of sleep and back again. As Theodore Roethke writes, "I wake to sleep." There is wisdom in accepting our fluxing fate for resisting it can bring much misery. Not accepting what is can leave us in denial, or probably worse, a state of anger or depression. Those states can lead us inaction and vain

attempts to cling to what has been. To take the case of climate change as a brief closing example, refusal to move from denial through anger and depression to acceptance means continuing to rely on fossil fuels and ultimately make the crisis worse. It is only when we accept the ecological change we face that we can try to ameliorate it.

Such acceptance is echoed in the closing lines of Roethke's "The Waking" which I take as the final words of my sermon: "I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow. / I learn by going where I have to go."

This New Year, may we each learn by going where we have to go and cling not to what has been but rather accept what is and will be.

Amen and Blessed Be.