

Spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship

19 August 2018

SERMON

**"CHANGE"**

by Geoffrey R Usher

About fifteen years ago, Ann arrived as usual to join me in Sheffield for the summer months. Over the Easter holiday weekend she got us started on stripping wallpaper in the hallway at home. I spent a day and a half then, and more time subsequently, either balancing on a step-ladder steaming off wallpaper, or down on my knees lifting the carpet from the stairs and the hallway and getting rid of the carpet tacks and nails.

Then the electrician and the plasterer came in to do their bits of work, and finally the painter came in to do his job. We still needed to have the new carpet fitted on the stairs, and the new timber flooring in the hall-way, but it looked much better than it did previously.

I was pleased about the result, but I have to say that my knees really felt it. They got quite stiff and sore, and I actually had trouble walking, and standing up from a chair. And then on the May Day holiday Ann, Andrew and I drove out to the Longshaw Estate in Derbyshire and spent about three hours walking.

It was a good outing, to the hill fort and back; but my knees felt it again! And I was reminded of the piece which will be familiar, in various forms, to most of you:

"How Do You Know You are Growing Old?"

Everything hurts - and what doesn't hurt doesn't work.

The gleam in your eye is the sun glinting on your bi-focals.

You feel like the morning after, but you haven't been anywhere.

You get winded playing cards.

Your children begin to look middle-aged.

You join a health club but don't go.

You know all the answers but nobody asks the questions.

You look forward to a dull evening.

You need glasses to find your glasses.

You turn out the light for economy, instead of romance.

You sit in the rocking chair but can't make it go. Your knees buckle, but your belt won't.

Your back goes out more than you do.

Your house is too big and your medicine chest not big enough.

(Jack Shaw: You've Got to Laugh)

Once upon a time, I would have done the work on the house, and the walk on the Longshaw Estate, without any difficulty, and without any after-effects such as stiff knees. Once upon a time . . .

But things changed. That was yesterday. Actually, it was quite a few yesterdays ago.

Thomas Carlyle wrote:

Today is not yesterday. We ourselves change. How then, can our works and thoughts, if they are always to be the fittest, continue always the same? Change, indeed, is painful, yet ever needful; and if memory have its force and worth, so also has hope.

We ourselves change. It has been said that life is perpetual growth; and that when you've finished changing - you've finished!

Lyman Lloyd Bryson wrote that "We are restless because of incessant change, but we would be frightened if change were stopped."

And Charles Franklin Kettering wrote that "The world hates changes, yet it is the only thing that has brought progress."

Change.

In 2005 the Annual Meetings of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches took place in Chester. There was no specific theme for the Meetings, as there had sometimes been in previous years - such as Ministry, or Access for Disabled People.

However, there was a general emphasis on Change, and the most important motion, with regard to domestic matters, was the proposal to amend the General Assembly's Constitution.

Three years previously, the Annual Meetings had been held in Sheffield. During those Meetings, my brother David was able to use the Foy Society's slot to offer a detailed critique of the General Assembly's system of governance, including a Council of about 25 people - a Council which, by general agreement among those who served on it, either then or previously, was far too large to be efficient or effective. David's rousing presentation led to the appointment of a Task Force which consulted widely across the whole General Assembly and produced a report setting out some recommendations and possibilities for changes in the Assembly's leadership structure.

The new Rule 6 in the General Assembly's Constitution dealt with the election of an Executive Committee, which was made up of eight persons, elected by a postal ballot, and an Honorary Treasurer, who was also a voting member of the Executive Committee. Elections would be held every three years, and members would be able to serve a maximum of two successive terms - so no-one would be able to get entrenched in a position.

And the new Rule 7 established an Electoral Panel's responsibility for conducting the election on the basis of one vote per person - person as in quota-paying membership of a congregation or fellowship or paid-up Full/Individual Member of the General Assembly.

That meant that each current member of a congregation such as Upper Chapel, who had paid the membership subscription for the particular year, would be entitled to a vote; as compared with the system of sending one delegate per congregation - or two delegates for a congregation of over 50 members - while Ministers had individual voting rights. That was quite a shift in the balance of voting power.

A shift in power. Jawaharlal Nehru knew something about a shift in power, as India moved from colonial rule to independence. He wrote:

Nothing in the world that is alive remains unchanging. All Nature changes from day to day and minute to minute; only the dead stop growing and are quiescent. Fresh water runs on, and if you stop it, it becomes stagnant. So also is it with the life of man and the life of a nation.

A long time before India's struggle for independence, the philosopher Edmund Burke wrote:

If a great change is to be made in human affairs, the minds of men will be fitted to it; the general opinions and feelings will draw that way. Every fear and hope will forward it; and they who persist in opposing this mighty current will appear rather to resist the decrees of Providence itself, than the mere decrees of men.

They will not be so much resolute and firm as perverse and obstinate.

And a couple of decades ago, the congregation of Upper Chapel in Sheffield changed their constitution to introduce two new categories of connection to the Chapel: Associate and Friend - as well as the category of Member. So, we had Members, Associates and Friends, and each person was free to choose whichever category he or she wanted, depending on things like voting rights. At the

time it was thought - hoped - that newcomers might start by becoming Friends, then, when they felt ready to increase their connection, becoming Associates, and then, when they felt fully involved and wanting to play an active part in the congregation's decision-making processes, becoming Members.

That really did not happen. Most people who joined the congregation during the next few years did so simply as Members.

And so the decision was then made that there would simply be Members of the congregation, paying an annual subscription to include the quota payment to the General Assembly and thereby entitling them to voting rights both at the Chapel and in the General Assembly. Other people could maintain a connection by paying an annual amount to receive the newsletter.

So, there were some changes in constitutional matters. It is worth noting that since those changes and the work done to streamline and clarify the Chapel's membership and mailing lists, the congregation had almost a dozen new members. That's quite a change, especially when you consider that the usual number of new members in the past had been about three per year, just about covering losses through deaths and departures.

Bruce Barton wrote:

Action and reaction, ebb and flow, trial and error, change - this is the rhythm of living. Out of our over-confidence, fear; out of our fear, clearer vision, fresh hope. And out of hope - progress.

One of our readings was from Robert Fulghum's second book, It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It. I want now to share a shorter piece from his first - and probably better known - book, All I Really Need To Know I Learned In Kindergarten:

Despite swearing I would never do it, I went to the thirty-year reunion of my high-school class in the heart of Texas. I had not seen those "kids" since the night I graduated.

And one quick glance confirmed my worst expectations. Bald heads, gray hair, wrinkles, fat, liver marks.

Old. We're *old* now, thought I. So soon. And it's all downhill from here. Decay, rot, disease, an early grave. I felt tired. I began to walk slower, with a noticeable limp. I began to think about my will and make mental notes for my funeral. This malaise lasted all of thirty seconds. Wiped out by the bright memory of two men I had met earlier in the summer at a truck stop in Burns, Oregon.

Mr Fred Easter, sixty-eight, and his good friend, Mr Leroy Hill, sixty-two. They were bicycling from Pismo Beach, California, to see the rodeo in Calgary, Alberta. They had been sitting on a bench by the beach reading in the newspaper about the rodeo, and one of them said, "Let's go!" and they got up and went. And here they were in Burns in flashy riding suits, with high-tech bikes and all. When I asked Mr Easter how come, he laughed. "Why, just for the hell of it, son. Just for the bloody hell of it!"



Fifty-eight hundred miles later, via Colorado and the Grand Canyon, they expect to arrive home in October, unless, of course, other interesting things turn up along the way. They are not in a race. I walked away from that encounter tall and straight and handsome and young - making new lists of all the things I would do and all the places I would go and all the things I would be in all the years ahead of me.

Look for me at the rodeo in Calgary in the year 2004. You'll recognise me by the bicycle bearing the sign  
PISMO BEACH OR BUST!

That was written more than thirty years ago. I have to admit that I don't know whether in fact he got to the rodeo in Calgary in 2004, on a bicycle.

Change is the unchangeable law of the universe. It is the only thing that is constant. Indeed, to be constant in nature would be inconstancy. And to blind oneself to change is not therefore to halt it.

As a congregation we have been through some changes in the dozen or so years of our existence, and we face more changes - and challenges - in the years ahead.

In responding to those changes and those challenges, we need to be open to new ways of working.

Gerald Hamilton Kennedy wrote:

Changing conditions demand changing methods, and to hold to out-grown methods because of a loyalty to an irrelevancy ("We've always done it that way") - to hold to outgrown methods because of a loyalty to an irrelevancy destroys our integrity and encourages the lie.

And Fridtjof Nansen said that "We need courage to throw away old garments which have had their day and no longer fit the requirements of the new generations."

We need to recognise that change is not necessarily growth, just as movement is not necessarily progress, but we need to be able to live with change.

Jawaharlal Nehru again:

Everything changes continuously. What is history, indeed, but a record of change? And if there had been very few changes in the past, there would have been little of history to write.

As we face the changes and the challenges which the future will bring, let us keep in mind the old prayer:

May we have the courage to change the things which should be changed; may we have the strength to accept what cannot be changed; and may we have the wisdom to know the difference.

Amen.