

In the Midst of Change

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD September 24

We packed up our apartment in Minneapolis, box after box filled with clothing, books, kitchenware, and treasured photos wrapped tightly in newspapers. I subconsciously realized that each cardboard box contained a little bit of our anxieties, uncertainties, fears, and apprehension, taped up and placed in a truck to be driven across the country. My husband and I embarked upon a road trip from Minnesota to Maryland. This journey marked a life-altering transition as I left behind the state I had temporarily called home to become your settled minister. Each minute, hour, and day of the journey brought me further from the familiar and closer to the unknown. With each turn of the wheels, I began the journey from student to teacher. With each green light we passed through I started to transition from intern to leader. Each minute on the expansive highway marked the adjustment from chaplain to parish minister. It was scary, it was unsettling, it was destabilizing. We were welcoming change.

Through my work in ministry and as an observer of the world around me, I note that we often prefer the comfort of our current ailments to the promising unknowns that accompany change. I grew up surrounded by divorce, both of my own parents and the parents of friends and of cousins. I'm not sure why so many of us shared this commonality. As a youth I noted that some children and many parents saw divorce as a release. Spouses were held in the bondage of arguments, resentments, and anger far longer than necessary in order to avoid the unknowns that accompany legal separation. Working with those in addiction demonstrated to me how many of the suffering find themselves stuck in the horrors of alcoholism rather than face their own demons – the same demons they drank to avoid and suppress – by entering a twelve-step group and doing that notably hard work of restoring their lives. Each day, if those spouses and addicts embarked upon this journey, they could tenderly, fearfully, and bravely travel further from the devastating familiar and closer to the promising unknown – and heal.

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith September 2023

Essayist Anaïs Nin wrote, “Life is a process of becoming, a combination of states we have to go through. Where people fail is that they wish to elect a state and remain in it. This is a kind of death.”¹ Becoming – what happens when we choose the unknown. We can envision the decay that results from maintaining a broken marriage or clutching to addiction. There are myriad opportunities – unique, inevitable hardships – that could result in debilitating complacency or in growth and healing. Becoming – the antonym to stagnation. Do we welcome intentional growth, and learning, or do our spirits die? I reflect on common yet no less debilitating experiences of death, depression, and notable wrongdoing, states that can demarcate life into before and after. We have initial, innate, unavoidable reactions: mourning that flirts with desperation, a deep sorrow that allows us to do no more than lie in bed, a guilt that weighs upon us as if an anchor dragging us to the depths of the sea. We can remain and let our spirits die, or we can begin the process of changing and starting anew, of living with intention, of welcoming change. May grief counseling, therapy, self-compassion, and seeking forgiveness serve as a catalyst to compassion, wisdom, and depth. May we journey from complacency to intention, from the known to the unknown, from stagnation to becoming, from death to life.

I reflect, too, on the wisdom of science fiction author Octavia Butler. In her apocalyptic novel *Parable of the Sower*, Butler offered a narration of the journey of a teenage girl realizing that her surroundings will shape her future; that in her struggle to survive her only constant is change. The protagonist pens into her journal:

Everything you touch you change
Everything you change changes you
The only everlasting truth is change²

“Everything you touch you change.”³ My reflections are personal and deviate from the plot of the novel while using the sentiments as a guide. The word “touch” offers a tone of intimacy to

¹ Quote from Soul Matters Worship Resources 2023

² *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler

³ *ibid*

me, so I treat my reflections as such. Each day we touch the soul of another; each day we react to those around us with compassion or indifference, friendship or animosity, greed or generosity, judgment or acceptance. And those may simply be strangers on the street, those may be acquaintances, those may be treasured beloveds – and yet those acts, sometimes small and seemingly inconsequential, sometimes fostered with great intention – they may deeply affect one whose broken heart needs kindness, who is lonely, who is impoverished either monetarily or emotionally, who judges themselves each and every day. And we live in a world of exchange.

“Everything you change changes you.”⁴ Let us focus for a moment on the repercussions of anger – again, on a scale either small or large. If we offer to the world anger and all it entails – judgments, harsh words, unnecessary reprimands, and inconsequential arguments – what we receive in return is two-fold. One, our inner spirits are wounded – we treat our inner selves just as we treat those we interact with – judging and hating just who we are. Second, often, if we offer anger, we receive anger in return – those cruel words and animosity reflected right back to us. We are receiving the same poison we offer those in our midst. Likewise, is it with kindness, compassion, and love.

“The only everlasting truth is change.”⁵ I had not thought of it this way before – but this sentiment is significant. We see transformation each day reflected in the cycles of nature, whether through the seasons or through the patterns of day and night. Or through that inevitable transition of life to death to decay which fosters life again. The trajectory of our own lives – birth to adolescence to adulthood to elder – inevitable unless we leave this realm in the process. And yet it is not only the natural world. We will mourn and rebuild our lives. We will injure others and offer repentance. We will find partners and lose partners. We will face detrimental hardships only to circle back to insight, calm, and beauty. This is inherent. This is everlasting.

⁴ *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler

⁵ *Ibid*

Change is scary and unsettling. It is a faith in that which cannot be known. It is constant and unavoidable. And yet let us highlight again that these transformations – except, perhaps, during those innate cycles of nature – arise from acts of intention. How can we welcome this intention into our lives in a way that fosters happiness, negating that which causes us harm and pain?

Two weeks ago, one of you offered me a timely article on Rosh Hashanah written by a professor of psychology. Dr. DeSteno reflected that Rosh Hashanah is a time of new beginnings and starting clean, while at the same time asks of us to contemplate death – tragic death – our own death. The focus seems to be misplaced and to foster dread when in fact it offers just the opposite. We are invited to reflect, how does our perspective alter when we survey our own death? When engaging with our own finitude we intentionally think about that which causes us happiness, crafting our future – whether death is unknowingly immanent, or decades away from us – our future may be one of contentment.⁶

Dr. DeSteno offers that in the West, we are clinging to that which causes detriment – chasing that elusive happiness through means that foster just the opposite.⁷ It is ingrained into our beings from a young age that happiness is acquired through individual pursuits – so we strive to seek wealth, prestige, accolades, material goods, and superficial beauty. And yet, I offer, our insides are despairing. We are chasing the unattainable, the unachievable, consistently focusing our efforts on that which will only lead to comparison, a loss of self-worth, and despair - a dream that fosters nightmares. What changes can we welcome? Social connections, and service to others.⁸

Social connections. How do we transform ourselves, potentially isolated and lonely, whether on the brink of desperation or simply feeling a bit of emptiness within? I think of those connections which will never seemingly amount to much, but which nonetheless foster a basic intimacy and spirit of communal well-being – opening the door for someone, offering an

⁶ From “The New York Times” *Rosh Hashana Can Change Your Life (Even if You’re Not Jewish)* by David DeSteno

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

unexpected compliment, inviting a stranger into conversation. Simple acts of kindness that offer well-being to all persons involved. We are called to intentionally reach out - to make strangers acquaintances and acquaintances friends. We are called to love, and to love deeply, and to cherish this love and never take it for granted.

Service to others. What do we welcome when we decenter ourselves and focus on the plentiful needs of the despairing among us? We become greater than any one, individual, isolated being could ever be – contributing to bettering a society where so many are destitute – offering ourselves meaning and purpose by contributing to the welfare of those among us. I think of contacting politicians – for government affects our lives in unimaginable ways. Of taking to the streets and becoming one more voice, one more body, against injustice. Of housing, feeding, and employing the unhoused. Of helping those released from prison craft a life when the law works to do just the opposite. Of housing migrants and providing the most vulnerable among us with basic human needs. Our country is in disarray and our future appears bleak. And yet if we hold on to hope we foster that flame within us – we ignite the spark of the divine – us to heal the world one act, one life, at a time. Praying with those who are losing faith, engaging with the elderly who are tucked away into hidden corners, encouraging children to befriend the outcast. That is welcoming change.

And so, we reflect. I offer to each of you what I believe to be true, that love, faith, and change are the three most vulnerable human experiences. Nevertheless, it is love, faith, and change that we need the most. And yet the only constant is change. With this in our hearts we know it is inevitable – we prefer the comfort of the unfavorable knowns to the true promise of the unknown. But let us take that leap. Let us pack into the moving trucks of our souls our anxieties, uncertainties, fears, and apprehension trusting that the journey and the destination will bring us joy, contentment, and happiness. So, in this moment, may we ask for courage. May we become and become and continue to become. May our spirits never die but flourish, ushering growth and strength for we can persevere. May that which we touch blossom and bloom and may our hearts flower in return. May we love with all our hearts strangers,

acquaintances, and friends alike, ushering in companionship in a time of brokenness and isolation. May we serve the world, healing one broken heart at a time, bringing forth love, compassion, and kindness where deprivation and fear so often fester. May we welcome change and may change welcome us.

May it be so, and Amen