

Change and Choice

Dawn Fortune, Interim Minister

Emerson Unitarian Universalist Chapel

September 20, 2015

There is a science to change. It has a beginning, middle, and an end. At least that's what the books all tell us.

I find the notion that there is a process to upheaval to be reassuring.

And like most simple explanations of the human experience, there is truth to it, but the whole answer is far more complex than can be adequately outlined on a motivational poster or in a paperback book in the "Self Help" section of the library.

Over the years, the process that people take as they absorb and adjust to change has been described by countless psychologists, therapists and theologians. The key thing they have in common is grief. All change involves grief.

We typically understand grief as the thing that happens when we suffer some kind of loss: the death of a loved one is the most familiar example. Also: the loss of a job, an injury or illness that takes away some function or ability that we once enjoyed. We grieve when our favorite sports team loses, or our political candidate does not win election. Depending on our level of attachment to each of those things, the level and intensity of our grief varies.

If something wonderful happens, we still go through the same stages of grief. We must adjust to the new reality by letting go of our understanding of how things were before the good thing happened. Think about the birth of a child in a family – by most accounts it is a profoundly joyous event. And yet parents and other family members find themselves going through the familiar steps of grief as they adjust to the reality of having a new member of the family. There is grief there: there is a loss of freedom, a change in priorities, the family focus has shifted to accommodate this new member, and everyone feels that shift. The process of that adjusting is identified as grief. If a person of modest economic means wins the lottery, it is not uncommon for them to describe with loss and longing the time before that event as being simpler and easier, even if their life had been a constant struggle for safety and security. It may have been terrible, but it was familiar. The person is grieving the loss of what was familiar, even though the new reality is by all accounts more safe, secure, and comfortable.

In his 2008 book "When the Past is Present," teacher and therapist David Richo reduces grief to three basic emotions: sadness that something was lost; anger that it was taken away, and fear that it will never be replaced. (Richo 2008)

This, like the other simple explanations, cannot be anything but incomplete.

Whether you subscribe to Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' original seven stages of grief model (Kubler-Ross 1969), or the more contemporary models created in the new reality of mass shootings and terrorist attacks, there are some basic steps that happen when we experience change.

First, there is **shock** or surprise at the event. Shock is an amazing thing – it can stop us in our tracks, unable to think or act or respond in any way. Our brains reject what our senses are reporting and our reactions to large events – even to things that are not physically threatening – can be physiological. Our heart rate increases, our breathing becomes shallow and fast to flood our muscles with oxygen, our pupils dilate and our adrenal glands spring into action, preparing our bodies for the instinctual fight/flight/freeze response. We are equipped with the animal instincts and genetics that millennia of evolution have seen fit to retain. We are highly evolved mammals with opposable thumbs and cell phones, but animals nonetheless.

Sometimes, there are warnings that change is coming – children growing up experience change that we all know is coming; politicians term-out of office, projects get finished, contracts come to an end.

Sometimes there are no warnings, as with natural disasters or acts of terrorism. Hindsight can sometimes illuminate missed warning signs, but noticing those things after the fact does not mitigate the effect of an apparent sudden and abrupt change.

The next stage we typically encounter is **denial**. Good or bad, this can't be happening. It can't be real. At any moment now, Wolf Blitzer is going to break into the election night coverage and say "We're terribly sorry, there's been a mistake, and John McCain has won the election." Our brains struggle to absorb what has just happened. We double-check the numbers on our lottery ticket. We think "we can actually get *married*. After all these years of not being allowed, now we can be married for real." We stare again at the grade on our final exam, sure it is some kind of mistake, or cruel joke, or *something*. And it's not that we don't want the happy thing to have happened, it is a natural process for our brains to try to find a way to explain the inexplicable.

Depending on the kind of change, we sometimes feel **anger**. We are angry that something was taken from us, we are angry that suffering went on so long before relief came. We are frustrated that what was once familiar is gone and we have to learn to live in this new and challenging reality.

Sometimes we look for someone to blame, seeking vengeance and retribution. We want to punish someone, anyone, for the pain that the change has brought. We want to build walls for protection, we want to wreak a similar kind of pain on whatever or whoever caused us harm. When the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building was bombed in 1995, United States Senator John McCain immediately took to the Senate floor and called for stricter immigration laws to keep out people who would do such an act. When Timothy McVeigh was identified as the suspect, there were some who considered that a fence around Kansas might still not be amiss, but by then the focus had shifted. In 2001, America went to war with the wrong country to avenge the attacks in New York and Virginia. The impulses of grief are powerful indeed.

Anger often serves as fear's bodyguard. When I am angry, it is often because I am afraid. I am afraid that I will lose something – respect, relationship, love, some possession and the joy or security it provides. I am afraid that I was at fault, that I could have done something to alter the course of events. Did I say too much? Should I have spoken up even though I was afraid?

Humans are a creative lot. We do not like discomfort and will go to great lengths to avoid it. When the reality of the change begins to sink in, people will begin to **bargain** – with God, with

science, with fate, with police. If I change my diet and exercise, maybe I can undo the newly diagnosed heart condition. If I do an extra credit project, I might pass the class. If I don't tell anyone, maybe I can go on my life the way it was before I won the lottery. If I pray hard enough for a miracle, perhaps my child will recover; my spouse will remember my face. Many are the parents who have whispered desperate prayers to a God whose existence they doubt, asking that they might suffer and die so their child can live. When change happens and grief is profound, we bargain with whomever or whatever we think might be able to help.

When the bargaining fails to work, people can become discouraged and **depressed**, as new waves of sadness wash over them. The change is real. It's here. There's nothing I can do to stop it. This depression can accompany joyous changes as well as sad ones. It's true. We're parents. It's the greatest thing ever. And our lives are irrevocably changed. Never again will we be able to do anything without first considering our child. It's an awesome thing, and there is grief and sadness with it.

In times of deep loss, this depression can linger and feel like hopelessness. We hear ourselves saying things like "It will never be the same. Nobody will ever make biscuits like Grandma used to. There will never be another president like Jack Kennedy. Or Jimmy Carter. Or Ronald Reagan.

And that is true. Change has happened, and life can never go back to the way it was – before 9/11, before your first child. Before your beloved became ill.

There is a great misconception that grief is a simple thing, there are these steps that are outlined that people go through, you check them off as you go and you're done. That's not how it happens. What does happen is we have the opportunity to adjust ourselves to a "new" normal. Because the old normal is gone. It will not come back. We will not see McDonald's cheeseburgers for 15 cents again. We will never again believe the earth is flat. We cannot bring back what has been lost.

So here we are, with this new set of circumstances, this jumble of emotions, and the discouraging news that this process is neither neat nor tidy nor painless. Grief is not a straight line. It's a cycle and a tangle and a process that never quite ends.

Eventually, we get around to **acceptance**, and then to **hope**. The two are closely linked. We begin to accept that the change is here and will not go away, that we have a new reality and that we *will* be able to function in it. We begin to think about our role in the future, how we're going to do this or that in this new situation.

Now some folks would say that this is where the grief ends. Yay! You've checked off the boxes, you're done. Only grief doesn't work like that. It comes back like waves, sometimes strong enough to knock us down and leave us sobbing in the supermarket. Human emotions, like human experiences, do not happen in a straight line. We cycle around, we bounce back and forth. Some of us hold onto our anger longer than others. Some of us polish the resentment at the injustice done to us and nourish it for years, while others are able to let it go and move on.

Change happens.

Our children's story this morning offers an over-simplified version of what happens when we are under pressure from life: it can defeat us by turning us into mush; it can make us hard and bitter and cynical; or we can lean into the hot water, give of ourselves in a way that changes the water – the pressure, the discomfort, the suffering – into a source of something good.

The example is good in that it offers an easily accessible metaphor for how people respond to stressful situations. The example is imperfect in that it presents an over-simplified model, with one “best” response, and two others that are portrayed as somehow inadequate or less ideal than that of the coffee bean.

Humans are not that simple. Viktor Frankl described his experience in Auschwitz as a complex and trying time. Guards who were capable of extreme brutality were also capable of occasional compassion and mercy. Prisoners sometimes were used to police other prisoners, and they could be every bit as brutal as the guards. And none of the people there was all good or all bad; most were some combination of the two. People did the best they could and they did what they needed to in order to survive. (Frankl 1959)

And yet, as with the final stages of Kubler-Ross' old linear model of grief, there is hope. Even amidst the pain and confusion of grief, we have choices.

Years ago, early in my 12-step recovery process, I complained to my sponsor about the state of the world. My job was terrible, my relationships with other people were terrible, my car was broken down, this person hated me, that one was mean to me, I didn't like the way this other one treated me, and the whole world was unfair and objectionable. My sponsor was a wise woman. She reached into her purse, took out her compact and handed it to me.

“Open it.” She said. I opened it.

“Hold it up to your face.” I peered into the tiny circle of mirror.

“No, not like that. Right up to your face.” She reached over and pushed my hand until the glass of the mirror touched the end of my nose. “There.” She said. “What can you see?”

“Nothing,” I grumbled. “I can only see a tiny part of my own face.”

“Right. That's the part of this world you have any control over. You. Just you. You can't change anybody else, and it's not their job to make you happy. And for you in particular,” she gave me a significant look. “That's the only part that's your business. You mind that and the rest will work itself out.”

She was right, of course, as recovery sponsors tend to be. When I was mindful of my own choices, my own behaviors and my own feelings, I discovered that I felt more like I was participating in life as opposed to having life be a thing that happened to me.

Change happens, and with it comes the familiar pattern of grief. Whether you experience that grief in seven steps or three or a dozen, we will all go through it. That is beyond our control.

The choice we have is how we handle each step along the way, whether we use three steps, seven, twelve, or some other number entirely. Awareness helps. When I realize that what I'm

experiencing is grief and not the world conspiring to upset my day, I am better equipped to handle the emotions as they come.

This congregation has been through a lot of change in the past couple years. It is likely to go through more changes in the next couple years. It'll bring us all plenty of ups and downs. And we can handle it. Remember: change happens. We can manage it, or it can manage us.

You do have choices about how to respond to this process. You do have power over your own behavior and your own feelings.

Let us go forward together.

Bibliography

Frankl, Viktor E. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1959.

Kubler-Ross, Elisabeth. *On Death And Dying*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1969.

Richo, David. *When the Past is Present*. Boston: Shambala Publications, 2008.

Choice, Change and Power. One thing we can be very sure of in life, besides death and taxes, is change! It is happening all around us and it is happening to us, regardless of our feelings about it. Change is the nature of all life. It is easier to be aware of the changes that are overtly affecting us and usually we have a judgment about these changes. But consider the changes that are so subtle that we aren't even aware they are happening. Choice and Change is a specialized half-day seminar happening March 27th in Doha, guaranteed to promote a positive, productive change in your life. Internationally recognized speaker, author and mental skills training expert Ches Moulton (UK) will head this event, sharing his specialized knowledge and time. The choices and changes that we make in our life, reflect the person that we are. Some choices are more important than others, and they require a considerable amount of thought. Making the right choice or decision changes your life in the right direction. Making a choice is an act of exercising your freedom to change your life and to be who you can be. Freedom always brings with it responsibilities. We need to remember that when we make a choice, we become responsible for our actions or behaviour.