

## RUMINATIONS ON THE MEANING OF CHANGE: (CLIMATE? CHANGE?)

Richard S. Gilbert – Keynote for NYS Convention of Universalists

Albany, NY – October 21, 2017

I invite you to begin this lecture by singing – “Enter, Rejoice and Come In,” *Singing the Living Tradition* # 361. We’ll line out the verses.

“Enter, rejoice and come in. Enter, rejoice and come in.  
Today will be a joyful day, enter, rejoice and come in.  
Open your ears to the song. Open your ears to the song.  
Today will be a joyful day, enter, rejoice and come in.  
Open your hearts everyone. Open your hearts, everyone.  
Today will be a joyful day, enter, rejoice and come in.  
Don’t be afraid of some change. Don’t be afraid of some change.  
Today will be a joyful day, welcome, rejoice and come in.”<sup>1</sup>

I submit the question of this hour: Are we afraid of some change? Herewith, some ruminations on its meaning.

One of my favorite cartoons depicts Adam and Eve walking and talking in the Garden of Eden. Adam says to her, “My dear, we live in an age of transition.” We don’t have her response.

The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus in 500 BCE had it right when he said that change is the only constant. He delivered a message to the ages when he said you can never step twice in the same river. This has been called the Flux theory.

Central to Buddhist teaching is the impermanence of everything. Existence is about change. Buddhism rejected a creator god - hence there is no such thing as ultimate reality. Life and death are dynamic processes; to explain the world in terms of eternal substances is as useless as if one tried to “tie the reflection of the moon to the water with the hair of a tortoise.”

So much for the metaphysical. Simply put: change is inherent in the very nature of things. It is not necessarily something we can choose or refuse. It simply is in the DNA of the cosmos, of the earth, of history, of our lives. Change happens.

### GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE

We are experiencing one kind of change that seems inexorable – change of which we should be afraid. Global climate change is perhaps the most important change topic of the century. “Climate is what you expect; weather is what you get.” At the 2012 conference of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science, one of the speakers talked about “The big inadvertent human experiment on earth with climate.” That experiment has been going on for a long time and the results are not yet in.

Another scientific observer said: “We have reached an environmental milestone – of which we should not be proud: there are now 400 parts per million of carbon dioxide in earth’s atmosphere, a point not reached for three million years in the Pliocene epoch when the earth was unbearably hot and sea levels as much as 60 or 80 feet higher; .... and we add to it every time we turn on a switch.”<sup>2</sup>

Some of us are old enough to remember the prophetic words of satiric song writer Tom Lehrer: “Just two things of which you must beware: don’t drink the water and don’t breathe the air.” What we human beings do to the earth comes back to haunt us. As *Time* magazine headlined its cover a few years ago, this is “the

year the Earth spoke back” with unprecedented hurricanes, melting ice flows, floods and fires. And while no single event can be precisely traced to global climate change, it is clear to a consensus of the world’s scientists, that this warming pattern creates the conditions for extreme weather.

Robert Frost put our predicament this way: “Fire and Ice”

“Some say the world will end in fire,

Some say in ice.

From what I’ve tasted of desire

I hold with those who favor fire.

But if I had to perish twice,

I think I know enough of hate

To say that for destruction ice

Is also great

And would suffice.”

Two biblical images come to mind. In one version of Genesis we read: “Be fruitful, and multiply, and *subdue* the earth.” In another translation we read, “Be fruitful, and multiply, and *replenish* the earth....” Which is it? Do we subdue or do we replenish? Is the earth a mine to be exploited or a garden to be tended? a mine we will one day exhaust, or a garden which replenishes itself – with a little help from responsible gardeners – the good stewards?

The earth is changing. Despite the evolution-deniers like William Brady of the classic play *Inherit the Wind*; despite the Climate Change Denier-in-Chief Donald Trump, it is changing, and – for good or ill – we are aiding and abetting that change. The alchemy of the natural evolution of the earth and our profligate use of its resources are bringing on a judgment day far different from those apocalyptic preachers who predict the end of the earth with the coming of Jesus.

Rhode Island Senator Sheldon Whitehouse wrote about his experience at a Senate meeting where he heard a fellow Senator say, “God won’t allow us to ruin our planet.” This Episcopalian chastised lawmakers for using religion to abdicate responsibility for protecting the earth. He pointed to Galatians 6:7: “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.” Whitehouse concluded: “We are here to do God’s work. He’s not here to do ours.”<sup>3</sup>

Our escalating problems with global climate change are not accidental – not natural – but the logical outcome of public and private policy. I have twice testified for Interfaith Impact of New York State at hearings on hydrofracking. Happily we were part of an environmental movement that actually won a victory when fracking was banned in the Empire State. I concluded my testimony by invoking an image from my vantage point as a cottage owner in the Finger Lakes. At the north end of Seneca Lake are two wind turbines, gracefully silhouetted against the sky, pointing toward a green future of 21<sup>st</sup> century renewable energy. These turbines point to the future; oil and gas derricks point to the past. Michael Mann, professor of meteorology at Penn State, put it this way. “Uncertainty? Yes, but we need to hedge our bets. Mitigating climate change is in fact a planetary insurance policy.”<sup>4</sup>

In dealing with any kind of change, I resort to my Unitarian Universalist theology which points to “the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. The question I raise is this: Does the earth have moral rights? We know and affirm human rights; animal rights have also begun to be part of our moral equation. But what about the larger context in which we live? It is intriguing to note that Article 1 of the 2008 Ecuadoran constitution affirms the rights of nature.

As a resident of the Finger Lakes I have been involved in various efforts to protect that uniquely beautiful area. Others have been more courageously involved than I; namely Ithaca College Professor of

Environmental Studies, Sandra Steingraber. She engaged in civil disobedience to prevent gas storage in salt caverns underlying Seneca lake. In her "Letter from Chemung County Jail" she wrote about other mothers: "They, like I, probably also keep a list labeled, 'Things to do before going to jail.'" Her courage to oppose destructive change and lead toward creative change leads me to state with conviction that our earth, our beloved planetary home, has moral rights. And we are the ones to defend them.

Here in New York State we have the opportunity to enact legislation that will place the Empire State at the cutting edge of the environmental movement: (1) working toward a Constitutional amendment that guarantees the right to pure water, clean air and a healthy environment. We know how these constitutional guarantees help in advocating for adequate public welfare and funding for our schools. This amendment must be passed this fall and again in 2018 before it goes on the ballot in 2019; (2) passage of the Climate Change and Protection Act legislation to target 2030 as the date by which New York will be powered 50% by renewable resources. This kind of hard, persistent advocacy work is what democracy looks like.

Climate change is both a real problem and a metaphor. We live amidst change that simply happens, but at the same time in the midst of opportunities to change the world in which we live.

### CHANGING THE POLITICAL CLIMATE

This brings us to another kind of climate – the political climate. Here, too, we find change rearing its head – like the god of the new year, Janus, who is simultaneously facing both backwards and forward. Both Barack Obama and Donald Trump ran on a "change" platform, with drastically different outcomes. One we have experienced as perhaps a mixed blessing; the other we can only dread. Lucky for us democracy as a political philosophy is based on the possibility of change. Writer E. B. White likened democracy to the score at the bottom of the ninth in a baseball game – there is always the possibility of change. That principle is captured in our Unitarian Universalist Association By-laws: "We affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process in within our congregations and in society at large."

Our civic life isn't looking very promising right now. Norm Ornstein, resident scholar at the conservative think tank, the American Enterprise Institute, has written that "we are living in a kakistocracy." You've never heard of a kakistocracy? A term coined two centuries ago, it has taken on new meaning in these last months. It is defined as "A system of government which is run by the worst, least qualified, or most unscrupulous citizens."<sup>5</sup>

One of the most incredible and ironic reactions to the Trump presidency is the dramatic increase in political participation by the public – what has been called by Bill Moyers "the importance of being a public nuisance," questioning the conventional wisdom and the status quo - trying to live out the spirit of those prophets of old who did not so much predict the future as to try to change the present. I see the political role of the church as prophetic - dropping Micah's plumb line of righteousness; with Isaiah loosing the bonds of injustice, with Amos letting justice roll down like waters, with Jesus blessing the poor and the imprisoned. In our contemporary civilization we might call this reaction "The People's Filibuster."<sup>6</sup>

I see the church as rather like the League of Women Voters with a theological twist - we deal with issues, not personalities. But we do deal with the problems that confront us - and with passion - even if God has not whispered the answers in our ears as our adversaries of the religious right claim God has whispered in theirs. It would be unfortunate if we shed our timidity to proclaim the Unitarian Universalist message of compassion, equity and justice. The late William Sloan Coffin used to say, "The moral test of spirituality is justice." We must not allow it to be said that Unitarian Universalism does not interfere with either your politics or your religion.

A recent example of trying to change the present by relying on Unitarian Universalist values occurred May 1 when I was in Albany for Interfaith Impact's annual Advocacy Day. Between scheduled meetings with legislators and their staffs, I went from office to office on the fourth floor of the Legislative Office Building dropping off our position papers.

While I was discussing health care with a staff member at Assemblyman Andy Goodall's office, Goodall walked in, overheard our conversation and invited me into his office for further discussion. We exchanged polite, but animated, opposing views for half an hour, making me late for my next appointment. I supported single payer; he wanted more privatization. We departed with a friendly handshake and mutual appreciation for a civil conversation across our gaping political and religious divide.

It was more than a political discussion. Goodall implicitly, and I explicitly, articulated theological views that undergirded our respective positions. He argued from a strongly individualistic point of view, saying that he wanted less government, more personal responsibility and more private competition. Fundamentally this Assemblyman from the Southern Tier wanted free market health insurance based on a radical individuality. He didn't want to have to subsidize someone else.

I advocated a government-based single-payer system in which all would contribute and all would benefit. My theological point was solidarity – an ethical Universalism. We are individuals, of course, but also members of one community, and should contribute to the good of the whole, even if it is not to our personal benefit. After all, I gladly pay taxes for public schools which my offspring do not attend. It is one of my contributions to the community. My understanding of Unitarian Universalism leads me to work for the common good – or, more theologically put – the Beloved Community.

I spoke for the “interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part” – you may have heard the term. Anyone who thinks they were self-made forgets how dependent they are on the community. Wealthy business executives, for example, ship goods to market on roads built by taxpayers; we citizens paid for the education of their workers; police and fire protection are supported by all of us. The “invincible young” who don't think they need health insurance and don't want to subsidize “old geezers,” not only are vulnerable, but one day will be “old geezers” themselves and will need help. As Maya Angelou put it: “No one can make it out here alone.” We are interdependent. Our ethic requires a long horizon.

This is what democracy looks like. This is what change might look like – not change that is inexorable – about which we can do nothing. This is change when, as our Unitarian Universalist prophet James Luther Adams put it, “we take time by the forelock,” when we echo the words of a cartoon newscaster who ended his broadcast with these words: “If you didn't like today's news, then create some of your own.”

## CHANGING THE RELIGIOUS (UU) CLIMATE

It seems to me that Unitarian Universalism is ideally suited to an understanding that we are agents of change. However, I am sobered by the reflection of James Luther Adams who once observed that most people join our congregations - not to have their values challenged and changed - but to have them reflected and reaffirmed. There is a dogmatism of the religious left that resists challenge.

Just this week I attended a soccer game with my son Douglas, in which his son, my grandson Sam, was playing. They lost 4-0, largely because of a tall and talented player whom Douglas recognized as the son of a contractor who worked on his house after a fire. I had some good conversations with that contractor, who has become the pastor of a large and influential evangelical church in Rochester. It was the run-up to a presidential election in which he and I had opposite and equally passionate views which grew out of vastly different theological persuasions. When he finished the work, and our discussion, he said to me – and I

agreed – that in our conversation we had decided that not all evangelicals were nuts and that not all liberals were flakes. I admit, I had changed my mind.

At a ministers' day conference at General Assembly one year we listened to seminary professor Tex Samples. He got to me viscerally when he told a story about a theology class in which he parodied the song *In the Garden*. I always thought that was one of the most maudlin religious songs I ever heard - "escapist spirituality" as Tex told his class. Tex even affected a nasal voice to sing the song to his class. He continued, "With affront aforethought, I was on a roll until after the class when a thirty-five-year-old woman approached me and told this story. "Tex, my father started screwing me when I was eleven and he kept it up until I was sixteen and found the strength somehow to stop it. After every one of those ordeals I would go outside and sing that song to myself: 'I go to the garden alone while the dew is still on the roses, and he walks with me and talks with me and he tells me I am his own.' Without that song I don't know how I could have survived. Tex, don't you...ever...ever...make fun of that song in my presence again."

I confess my taste in that kind of music has not changed, but I did change my mind in appreciating how it might be meaningful – even life-saving – to others.

In seminary one of my professors used the term “growing up absorbed” as a variation on Paul Goodman’s counter-culture classic *Growing Up Absurd*. I played with the idea that as a Unitarian Universalist I was always growing – hopefully “in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man,” as the Christian scriptures describe Jesus. “Growing Up Absorbed” became a book whose thesis was that growth – or change, if you will – is the central motif in liberal religious faith. And so I conclude that our Unitarian Universalist religion is well equipped to deal with the change in which we are engulfed because it is based on the capacity to change and to be changed in all human endeavors.

We were made for times like this.

### CONCLUSION: CHANGE IS GOOD. YOU GO FIRST

We began with the metaphysical aspects of change, the cosmic context in which we live. We move to the urgent matter of global climate change, and from there to the need for drastic political change and from there to religious change. At last we come down to that most personal of questions: are you afraid of some change? What UU minister – or lay person – has not quoted Gandhi: “Be the change you want to see in the world. If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change.”

DeReau K. Farrar, current Music Director, First Unitarian Church of Portland, wrote to the UU Musicians Network in these words: “Change is a word on wheels. It’s not a destination, but a journey. If I am to ‘be change,’ I must commit to humility and refuse to settle for my own comforting achievements .... I wonder how often I think *I’ve already been the change* – and I’m waiting idly for the tendencies of the world to catch up.”<sup>7</sup>

It all comes back to us – this matter of change. I think of my seminary dean, professor, colleague and friend Angus MacLean. He wrote a rollicking good autobiographical book *Goodbye Everything – Hello What?* It was a funny and poignant story of Angus and his cousin, filled by the Presbyterian holy spirit in which he was reared, heading out from Cape Breton, Canada, to be teen-age evangelists on the western plains. Out of that adventure he became one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century prophets of liberal religion. “Goodbye everything, hello what?

That is the nature of what it means to change. We are always hanging out in the Garden of Eden. Every age is an age of transition. Aren’t we always living on the cusp? On the cusp between past and future?

Between now and then? Between remembering and anticipating? Between good and evil? Between work and leisure? Between meaning and despair? Between doing and being?

Look at the way we walk. We make progress only when we throw ourselves off balance by putting one foot forward - and then the other - to maintain our balance. Besides, standing still is no way to live a life. We are always between things. We always live on the cusp. We never arrive. We are always arriving. There are worse places to be. Perhaps that is, after all, the very best place to be. We live forever on the cusp of life and living. We are forever in the midst of change.

The times in which we live are so often discouraging. Each day brings some new issue – even if in a tweet. I agree with the cartoon figure in sackcloth and ashes, walking down the street carrying a sign which read: “The world is not coming to an end. Therefore, we must suffer along and learn to cope.”

On the other hand, there is a reticence to change built deep into our psyches. I think of my favorite Dilbert T-shirt – you know Dilbert, the anti-hero of high-tech. I have forgotten who gave it to me, but I have never forgotten the words printed below the visage of Dilbert: “Change is good. You go first.”

Change, says my wife, has direction, velocity and intent. Our direction is the future – hesitant, stumbling, but courageous steps toward the Beloved Community. We know the going will be slow – and at times painful – but nevertheless, we persist. Our intent is to change ourselves, and in so doing we change the world.

The late folk singer Pete Seeger built a schooner called the Clearwater to take people on Hudson River excursions and enlist their support for cleaning up the river. Although it was a small endeavor, Seeger likened it to a seesaw with one end anchored to the ground by a basket of rocks, while activists were at the other end using teaspoons to slowly fill a basket with sand. Someday the balance will tip and the rocks will be sent flying into the air. People will ask: “How did that happen so quickly?” It was because of “us and our damned little teaspoons.”<sup>8</sup>

How about you? How are you going to change? What habits may contribute to any feeling of spiritual stagnation? What moral issues will float to the top of your agenda for a nation in moral crisis? What challenges that you have been ducking, will you now embrace? If you are young in what issues will you invest yourself as a change agent? If you are old, how can you become a change agent in the years left to you? What legacy of change would you like to leave?

May we not shirk the necessity of growth and change. As Kate Murray expressed it: "Beginnings are not about having the bravery to continue, but the courage to start." Let us begin again together - with courage. Change is good. Let's all go first.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Singing the Living Tradition* # 361.

<sup>2</sup> “Heat-Trapping Gas Passes Milestone, Raising Fears,” New York Times by Justin Gillis, May 11, 2013

<sup>3</sup> “Does God Hate Climate Change?” Alternet 5/10/13.

<sup>4</sup> *Democracy Now*, May 13, 2013. “The Hockey Stick and the Climate Wars: Dispatches from the Front Lines.”

<sup>5</sup> *The Atlantic*. “American Kakistocracy.” Norm Ornstein. October 9, 2017. *The Atlantic Confirms It: We are Living in a Kakistocracy*

<sup>6</sup> *Public Citizen*, Fall 2017, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Unitarian Universalist Musicians Network Chat, September 12, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> (Interview in Studs Terkel’s *Hope Dies Last* as reported in *Trinity Seminary Review*, Fall, 2005, via *The Christian Century*, November 15, 2005, p. 7)