

Changes sermon--The Tao that Can be Known©

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The title of this morning's sermon is the very first verse of the Chinese scripture the Tao Te Ching. The Tao or "the way that can be known and completely understood." The Tao is not the complete way: the holy sacred mystery that can be named, quantified, measured and predicted is not the whole deal-- the complete picture-- because, while we can be in alignment with the way and the energy and life forces in our universe, we are fooling ourselves if and when we think we can control change or have all the answers.

The Eastern Mind and the Western Mind of philosophers had diametrically opposed theological understandings of change and eternity. In the west, Greek influenced ancient Christianity with the idea that God was the ultimate good and this was true because God did not die and decay hence clearly showing that God was pure. Being unchanging was seen as the ultimate goal. The fact that the human body got old, died and decayed proved that it was inherently sinful or cut off from God and godliness.

In the East, especially in Chinese thought expressed both in Taoism and through the I Ching, we see just the opposite. In fact, the I Ching translates into the Book of Changes. In eastern Chinese thought, the universe was considered to be constructed with change as a central building block: One could align oneself with change and one could learn to read and anticipate change and move with the river of change.

I believe --- and I think quantum mechanics (what I understand of it anyway) affirms-- that the nature of the universe is change or that change is a core element of existence. So theologically and scientifically, I know or accept that change is an integral part of life; but why, oh why, is change so hard? Why, oh why, is change so often painful? If we study the components of change, they can help us develop compassion for ourselves and others; we can better navigate big and small changes in our personal and communal lives.

Think back 5 years ago. How are things different for you now than they were then? And did the fact that you wanted the change or worked for it affect your emotional well being? What about changes that were unwelcome or unfortunate? Did anything good or pleasing come out of those experiences? Some of us have experienced major life changes within this last 5 years and all of us have lived a life filled with changes. It is helpful as we navigate our inevitable changes to understand spiritually and psychologically how to prepare for those changes and or how to understand what others are going through as they experience change all around us.

Change is situational. It is the move to a new location, or the addition of a key team member or family member, reorganization at work. Transition is psychological. It is a three phase process that people go through as they internalize and come to terms with the details of the new situation.

The first part of the transition phase is “letting go of the old ways.” The second part is called the “in between” part or the “neutral zone”. The third part is the “new beginning.”

So for me, a big change in my life was the move from Wisconsin to California. The neutral zone really began for me when I had to pack half the house just to make it look more spacious. And to get rid of stuff because we knew that we would have 1 /3 of the space we had in Wisconsin. The next part of this particular neutral zone, was the actual car ride on Route 66. For that week, we had no home. We had rented an apartment, sight unseen and heading towards that was a bit scary.

Several things helped me navigate this massive change. First, our family created a timeline day by day, week by week, and sometimes hour by hour of what was going to happen and who was responsible and what we needed. I made a list of movers. I made a list of places to accept furniture donations. I made a list of folks to hire to paint the house and do the minor repairs we needed to get it ready to sell. Then there was the interviewing and bid collecting of movers. Then we searched for an apartment in San Diego online. We also had to figure out how to move our cats.

In addition, it was also my son’s high school graduation because don’t you know ... often it’s not just one change they tend to clump up sort of like cat litter. So we fully participated in the graduation senior rituals and even planned a party in the midst of planning our move because I knew that the rituals around high school graduation are important, not just to the kids, but also to the parents. It reminded me that I needed to let my relationship with my son evolve and mature. All the rituals and the party helped to celebrate and commemorate this poignant change.

The second part of any change involves letting go. All change, even ones that are planned for and even initiated, involve the end of something and the resultant loss. Maren had to let go of her foodie group. I said goodbye to one of my best friends and my book group. We all had the same doctor and dentist and knew that once we left those would be another loss. It is so nice when you have a doctor who knows your history as well as your family. And even though having a plan and handling or trying to handle and manage change is optimal, we still so often--even with the best planning, experience “brain freeze.” Sometimes when we are on overload, our capacity to think and process information is severely limited. Sometimes our levels of motivation are reduced to almost zero. Especially when loss is involved.

After the losses though come the challenges of a new beginning. How do I take out the trash? Where is the recycling? How do I go about finding a new dentist and doctor? Figuring out the damn freeway system (I am still trying to figure that out). I start in what I think is the middle lane and pretty soon all the lanes on the right are gone and a whole new freeway sweeps in on my left.

Fortunately, I know about transition theory. I know that just because a change happens, it doesn't mean that everything is settled. I know that for a change to be successful, for it to stick, I have to make room for my feelings of loss.

So when you are experiencing a change or when a change is thrust upon you, or when you are asked to go about doing things a new way, the change won't stick or work or feel right unless care is taken to attend to the losses of identity and knowledge that occur.

Every transition or change begins with an ending. For me I had to let go of friends. I had let go of my job. I let go of my feelings of competency. I have had to let go of my feelings of competency so often, I'm getting really good at it. Even now, I get lost coming here to church sometimes. Getting lost was particularly prolific when we first moved to San Diego. My best course of action when I'm lost (figuratively or literally) was to be gentle with myself. I will also confess right here and right now that swear words were also uttered on occasion.

I had to continue being gentle with myself because I sort of got used to apartment living downtown and then had to get used to our new house. And it took a long time for our new house to feel like home. And it seems silly in one regard, but in another it makes sense from a broad scope viewpoint. I missed apartment living. I especially missed it when stuff in the new house broke and I had to deal with fixing it instead of just calling the manager to fix it. Every change, even good ones, even ones that we welcome, ... bring losses. We damage ourselves when we don't account for and grant ourselves kindness during these times.

When we are playing a leadership role in a family or organization it is important for us to engage in some helpful practices to assist those around us, and even ourselves, with the changes and all the emotions that come with it.

First, it is helpful to describe the change as best we can. Second, it is helpful to visualize the change as if it was the white ball on the pool table. When this ball changes position, or gets to its new spot, what other balls will it hit? In what ways will this new change initiate other changes? Third, we look at how each ball, each additional change, affects the surrounding people. Each person that the change ball touches will, in effect, have to give up something. If we ignore the losses and ending associated with this our chances for successful changes are jeopardized.

Here is a story of a change that did not work because the leadership did not pay attention to the emotions of the people affected. The Italian clothing firm Benetton decided to acquire a bunch of sporting good companies with the idea of pairing their clothes with sports equipment. They bought Nordica ski boots, Roller Blade inline skates, Prince tennis rackets and Killer Loop snowboards. In their big company minds they just assumed that everyone would be delighted to be a part of their big company. They combined sales forces and wanted everyone to move to the company headquarters in New Jersey. They failed to take into account that the folks that were selling the tennis rackets and snowboards were doing it because they loved the sport, not the retail. At the Rollerblades company, the employees spent their lunch breaks skating together through Minneapolis's lovely parks and lakes and playing roller hockey. After the acquisition, more than half the staff had their jobs eliminated. Those who remained were to move to New Jersey and report to folks that knew nothing about rollerblades. The only way the acquisitions team could convince the remaining Rollerblade staff to move to New Jersey was by giving them raises and promotions and then promise that if after a year they still didn't like it, the company would pay their moving expenses back to Minnesota. Of the 21 Rollerblade folks who made the move 20 of them moved back and only one stayed. Bennington went from posting profits of 5 million to losses of 31 million. They did not help people through all the transitions involved in the change. They did not attend to the losses and the other emotions like anger, bargaining, anxiety, sadness, disorientation and depression. They completely missed out on understanding why and what kind of meaning those folks at Rollerblade found in their work. All too often folks who plan out the changes do so in their minds without considering the hearts of the people who are affected.

I know that each of us will be going through our own changes this year as well as being part of a community. This church is also going through changes. As one of the leaders of this change, I want to make sure that we move forward as attentive to and compassionate with the ups and downs of the changes and transitions that UUCOD is going through this year.

I know what this looks like for me, and am now contemplating and discerning what the neutral zone will look and feel like for the members of UUCOD. The change from one minister to another is not just a change in minister: it is a journey from one identity to another. Knowing this and the components of change, what identity are you moving from and to? And what will you need individually and collectively to make this a generative experience? As we move forward, I want to make sure you remember that I am available to meet with you if you find yourself struggling with church life and our changes.

As I have been cogitating on change this week, my dear friend JQ shared a picture of her house. She lives in Santa Rosa. The picture showed burn - scorch marks on a tree in her front yard and total devastation of the house that had been across the

street. My colleague Rev. Chris, who pastors the Santa Rosa Unitarian Universalist Church has been ministering to those in the church community who have experienced major trauma and change. Soon his ministry will shift to encompass the transitions related to all of the loss and trauma. Then my sister called. She has been complaining about her boss for at least a year, maybe longer. Well, he got demoted two levels on Thursday. Even though in one respect this is a good change, she will be mired in transition for weeks and perhaps months as she is reassigned and her duties will shift.

Change is everywhere. We can't avoid it, but we can understand it and engage it in ways that are generative. Here are some examples of what I mean when I say generative. Steve Jobs and Wozniak built their first computer by themselves because they couldn't afford the computer Heath kit. Yamaha survived the sagging piano market by venturing into the electronic keyboard. Brother, which made sewing machines that fewer and fewer people were buying, adapted to building printers. These organizations felt a need, somewhere just trying to survive, and they all were willing to work with the challenges and create something new and sustaining. I see the same things happening here.

Perhaps the changes in your own individual life are not overwhelming but remember, for many around you, transition feels like the Charles Schultz Peanut's character, Linus. He always has his trusty blanket. The transition time is like Linus while his blanket is in the dryer. He/we don't feel as powerful, comfortable and confident when our blanket is in the dryer.

So let's be gentle with ourselves and each other as we go through our transitions here at UUCOD over the next 10 months. We have a plan. We have each other. And we will make our way through these transitions in meaningful and generative ways.

May it be so. Blessed Be.

Amen.