



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Change is inevitable, growth is optional

Clay Nelson © 6 June 2021

In 1964 I lived in a small town near the top of the Rockies, 60 miles from a town of any size. It was the year I got my learner's permit to drive. Like most males of that age I took every opportunity to practise driving our new car, our third, but our first with an AM radio. As it was in the top 10 on the charts, I frequently heard Dylan's new hit, warning that, "The times they are a-changin'". Even at 15 that seemed obvious. It had been only six months since JFK was assassinated. As a country we were still grieving. But whether we were ready or not for more change, 1964 was to be momentous. The Beatles kicked off the year, invading in February. The closest I got to them was watching them on the Ed Sullivan show. Besides, I wasn't impressed, and thought the Fab Four were just a flash-in-the-pan fad. Little did I suspect I would have in my music library all of their albums by the time I was wondering who would still need me at 64. Nor did I suspect that my next birthday would be celebrated living in LA going to a high school six times larger than my previous one.

Nineteen sixty-four was a year of daily cultural and societal change: from the introduction of the Ford Mustang (yes, I remember when and where I was when I saw my first one pass through town) to the passing of the Civil Rights Act, ending legal segregation; from the ratcheting up of the Vietnam War to the first draft cards being burned; from Bob Dylan turning on the Beatles to weed to the release of the film *Mary Poppins*; from Martin Luther King Jr receiving the Nobel Peace Prize to LBJ's "War on Poverty".

While I was oblivious to much of what was happening outside the US, lots happened in NZ in '64 as well, including the arrival of the Beatles in June. Having partied earlier with Dylan in the US, they may have performed here stoned.

For those of a certain age who were born here, you may remember some of these events: the Marsden Point refinery and the Lyttelton road tunnel both opened, the fledgling anti-apartheid movement protested a cricket test between New Zealand and South Africa, and Auckland's population surpassed 500,000. 'Sixty-four was also the year Tram #252, displaying the message "End of the line", travelled from Thorndon to Wellington Zoo for the last time, ending the use of electric trams in New Zealand; the specialist armed offenders' squad was formed; Peter Snell took gold in the 800m and 1500m events at the Tokyo Olympics; whaling ended in New Zealand; Massey University was established and the design for the Beehive was unveiled. Also Kay Parish was born.

This walk down memory lane more than makes the point that change is constant and unavoidable and as natural as breathing, or living for that matter. Even most of the cells in our body replace themselves eventually. Unfortunately, brain cells don't, making it impossible to forget the way it used to be or those poor choices we made in the past. Did I really once think bellbottoms and Nehru jackets were cool?

There are essentially only two kinds of change. The first is change we do not seek. Some change happens to us all, directly or indirectly, like disasters. Since my arrival in New Zealand there have been a number: the Christchurch and Kaikoura earthquakes, the Pike River mine explosion, the tragic massacre at Christchurch mosques, the Covid pandemic, and last week's Canterbury floods most quickly come to mind. Some change is more personal, like losing a job, being enmeshed in an abusive relationship, financial woes, the death of a loved one, or a disheartening diagnosis.

The second is change we seek or hope for: a new grandchild, a better job, falling in love, getting our Covid vaccine; having another birthday instead of the alternative.

But whether we seek a given change or not, we have many possible reactions. In general, present company excepted, my experience tells me most do not welcome change no matter how resigned to it they are. You, however, must like change: you are Unitarian Universalists, a thing apart from more traditional or conservative religious folk. The latter are more like young Calvin in the Calvin and Hobbes comic strip. As Calvin and Hobbes, his tiger friend, are riding down a hill at a breakneck speed in his wagon, Calvin announces "I thrive on change! Nonplussed, Hobbes exclaims, "You!?" He goes on to remind Calvin, "You threw a fit this morning because your Mom put less jelly on your toast than yesterday!" Calvin, unrepentant, explains further, "I thrive on making **other** people change."

Unitarians are more like the visitor to a monastery in Europe perched high on a cliff, hundreds of metres in the air. The only way to reach the monastery is in a basket, which is pulled to the top by monks who reel the basket up by muscle power alone.

The ride up the steep cliff in that basket is terrifying. The visitor gets exceedingly nervous about half-way up as he notices that the rope by which he is suspended is old and frayed. With a trembling voice he asks the monk who is riding with him in the basket how often they change the rope. The monk thinks for a moment and answers brusquely, "Whenever it breaks."

We may get nervous in our pursuit of change, but we are IN the basket. Risk is an essential ingredient to embracing change.

Throughout our history, we UU's have pushed for theological change: ethics instead of belief, reason instead of superstition, the facts of science instead of the wishful thinking of doctrinal imposed faith, the potential for human good instead of original sin, human responsibility instead of divine intervention, life in the here-and-now instead of life in the hereafter, and respect for the wisdom of all spiritual paths instead of the arrogance of a my-way-or-the-highway, one, true religion.

Many go to Sunday worship to feel comfortable and complacent, to be reassured that what has always been will always be. This suggests they believe they have arrived at their spiritual destination. Unitarian Universalists come to be challenged to stretch and grow, not to save our souls but to grow them, to be transformed and to transform our world, to embark on a lifetime adventure of exploration and discovery, a journey that never ends. We believe in and are dedicated to change. Which, of course, explains why we are amongst the smallest of New Zealand's faith communities.

That said, coping with change is hard. Even change we seek comes at a cost. Grief. With every change there is a loss. For instance, we might want the church to grow, but the loss is that we may no longer know everyone worshipping with us.

Humans being human, we might want to change but still we resist it. Barter for more time. Deny its necessity even as we examine the fraying rope. We might want to embrace change willingly, but we would like it to sneak up on us rather than our having to jump eyes wide open into the basket. But it doesn't work that way. Change isn't a choice but a challenge to become who we really are. Every time we consider whether or not to trust the rope there is an implied question: Are you ready to embody what you say you believe? How we respond to situations that present themselves determines what spiritual transformation will take place.

That's the spiritual meaning of every change we face: not what happens to us, but what we do with what happens to us and who we decide to become because of what happens to us. Yes, it means taking a risk, but not taking it is a risk as well. The risk is the failure to grow from what we go through. Yes, the times are still a changin', and so are we.

Meditation / Conversation starter:

Share one of the most difficult changes you have been challenged by,
and how did you respond to it?