

Can You Spare Some Change?

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Change is inevitable. It is the perennial fact of life. We learn this at a very early age. Indeed no less than the classic children's story Alice in Wonderland teaches us this. "Who are you?" the Caterpillar asks Alice. "I—I hardly know, Sir, just at present." Alice replied rather shyly, "at least I know who I *was* when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then."

So often we know the fact of change to be true intellectually, but we so rarely experience it directly at our every-day level. Change is often slow and imperceptible. Day in and day out we go through our routines almost in a rut. The same shows come on the same nights. The same reports are due at the end of the month. The bills have to get paid. However, over the course of seven years, all of the cells in our bodies die out and new cells take their place. Of course if we were asked we might remember something from our physics and chemistry classes that taught us that at the molecular level change is the norm. The molecules and atoms in our bodies are flying around all over the place, never

staying still. So Alice was right in her response—she was in fact changed several times since she got up that morning. But that is not our usual experience of life.

That experience of stability, of sameness, of being in a rut or a never-ending routine can be a powerful thing. We live our lives through the notion of inertia—when we are at rest we want to stay at rest. Some therapists call this state “homeostasis.” Things are just humming along, and I am very comfortable with how everything is going. It doesn’t demand much from me, and I don’t participate much in my own life. There is little reward, but there is almost no risk and therefore I avoid fear. It is this state of life that disgusted Henry David Thoreau and according to him, he went to Walden Pond to avoid such an existence. “Most men lead lives of quiet desperation.” He observed.

I have been there. For eight years I served a church quite happily; the same job, the same people, mostly in the same house. Probably could have done so for another eight years. But Thoreau is right; there is a nagging feeling of desperation in that kind of life. I found a creeping feeling that this is something more for me out there—somewhere over the rainbow. That feeling is what ultimately lead me here to you. A new job, a new church, new people, tomorrow a new baby, and soon a new house.

A couple months ago a good friend of mine, and colleague, asked me what the search process was like. He was about to get into this year, and wanted to hear about my experience of it last year. I said well, have you ever seen the show Star Trek? There is a new Star Trek movie coming out in a few weeks and I won't be here to talk to you about it, so I am bringing it up now. Of course he had seen it. Well you know the transporter machine they use to go down to various planets? "Beam me up Scottie!" and all of that? Supposedly it takes apart all of your atoms, moves them at the speed of light, and then reassembles them wherever you want to be. Imagine you entered this device, but instead of transporting you instantaneously to your destination it happened very slowly, in small increments. Part of you is here and the other part of you is there. You are never fully in one place, but seemingly always somewhere in between. What if it took you a year to get beamed from one place to the next? That is what the search process is like. Slow, at times painful, and if there are any alien monsters chasing you in your current church you don't get to escape them right away. You know you are leaving one place and so you can not be fully present there. But the new place you are headed to is just a dream, a fantasy full of your own projections and fears until finally all of your atoms are successfully transported there.

It is this in-between state that is the most difficult. Despite the inevitability of change and transformation in life, so often it is not easy

even when the change positive. William Bridges talks about a three stage approach to change. There is the old way, the rut, the routine, the homeostasis where we kind of cruise along rather comfortably. Then there is the second stage. This is the in-betweenness of change. It is like getting stuck in the transporter in Star Trek. You aren't quite here and you aren't quite there. All of your reference points are discombobulated. Then there is the new reality, the New Being as one theologian put it. This is your new life now adapted to the change that occurred. It is your next stage of growth and development as a person. Granted, most of us would not necessarily have chosen some difficult experiences in our life just as a growing experience, but I say if you are going to get your world rocked, you might as well learn from it! There are lots of examples of this. A child goes off to college. This is a huge transition not only for that young person, but for the family they are leaving. Sometimes mom and dad come home to an empty house and they have to remember what it was like just being a couple again without the kids. Then just when they get used to it the kids come back after graduation! Or at the national level, 9/11 was a transition from an old way of seeing ourselves as a nation in relationship to others. After that horrible event we had to wake up to a new reality, or actually a new perception of reality, that should have dispelled our illusions of invincibility.

Actually Bridges gets this threefold approach from an Anthropologist, Arnold Van Genep who studied, and coined the term,

“rites of passage.” Van Genep noticed that when adolescent boys in African tribes were about to come of age, they were assembled into groups. These groups of children were then taken by the elders into a separate area, away from their homes and family. Sometimes it was the woods, as in Native American vision quests, or it might be up in a mountain cave. This second stage, phase two of change, he called the “liminal” phase. It was when one crossed from being a child into being an adult. After performing some rituals and learning important information about how an adults behaves, these young boys were reintroduced to the village as men. Sometimes they had a different name. This is seen more commonly in the Jewish tradition of a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. But there are secular variations of the liminal phase. When one joins the military you go to “boot camp.” Less strenuous is “orientation” in college. Another liminal phase is “paternity leave”.

I will never forget the night that Sharon told me she was pregnant with our first son Thomas. I was sitting downstairs reading a book. I swear this is true: it was a Star Trek book! I was enjoying a quiet evening at home, my last precious minutes of my old reality, when suddenly I heard a scream come from the bathroom upstairs. “Great!” I thought, “Sharon saw a mouse under the sink. Or it is some bug I will have to kill.” You see Sharon’s “I’m having a baby” scream and her “I saw a bug” scream are pretty much the same scream. I didn’t know that then. So Sharon tells me that she has had a positive pregnancy test.

According to her I look like I saw a ghost. I was in genuine shock. The first thing I said was, “I need a drink!”

Believe it or not, we had been trying to have a baby for months. Why the surprise? Well I think it is just that the liminal phase is so disconcerting sometimes. Your old way of understanding yourself has faded away and the new one hasn't yet come into focus. “I am going to be a father!” That is a shock. That is a rite of passage from one way of living your life to another. It means seeing yourself in a whole new role to which you are unaccustomed. The second time Sharon told me she was pregnant, I was excited and happy. I didn't freak out too much the second time. Maybe I should have, but I could enjoy the moment more now that I understood what it was. Transitions and change are always hard, but with a frame of reference comes less fear. There will still be surprises I am sure. We are going from two-on-one to one-to-one. If basketball teaches us anything it is that it is easier to play a zone defense than man-to-man. Marina, our Business Manager, walks around the office going, “You don't know what you are getting into when you have two!” She is probably right.

Easter is the season of transitions. Jesus makes the most radical transformation imaginable: from life to death to life again. The resurrection is the most liminal moment one could conceive of! How odd would that be? How surreal to go from being dead to being alive again. Matthew captures that surreal-ness quite well actually in his final

chapter. There is an earthquake. The guards around the tomb are in a daze, sort like they are hypnotized. Then an angel of the Lord comes whose appearance is like lightening. What does that mean? He speaks to these two women who scurry off to find a resurrected Jesus when they were intending to go speak to the disciples. The Bible says they left in fear and great joy. That is an interesting combination of emotions: fear and great joy. That is exactly what we experience isn't it? When we are in the midst of some huge change in life. The liminal phase between our old reality and whatever that new thing on the horizon might be is filled with fear and great joy. Even the good stuff like having another baby has elements of fear and great joy. That is the nature of change. "I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then."

What can we hold on to in the midst of change? What thread is there that keeps us whole as a person between the three stages of change? I like to think, what if instead of the two women who went to see Jesus after his death, it was a Zen master he had encountered? One of the big name guys like Hakuin or Hui-Neng. What would that exchange be like? I think the Zen Master would ask only one question of Jesus: what is it that resurrects? Are you an angel? Are you a zombie? Are you just the guy you were before? Are you God? What is that continuity that persists from Maundy Thursday, through Good Friday, to Easter Morning? A good Easter koan for us.

I shouldn't presume to know what Jesus' response would be to such questions. I am sure they would be better than my attempts at them. But I would like to think that he gives us a clue in the much neglected, and quite rich, Gnostic text known as the Gospel of Thomas. The Gnostics were a group of early Christians who believed that only they knew the true teachings of Jesus, and that these true teachings must be kept secret from others who were less spiritually developed. "Gnosis" in Greek means "knowledge". So these are Christians with the secret knowledge that is supposedly given to us in texts like Thomas.

The disciples ask that question that keeps coming up again and again in the New Testament: "When will the Kingdom of God come?" Jesus says: "It will not come by waiting for it. It is not a matter of saying here it is or there it is. Rather the kingdom of God is spread out along the earth and yet men do not see it." Now it is Jesus' turn to be doling out the mysterious, mystical aphorisms! Essentially Jesus is telling us that the Kingdom of God is not some external reality, or at least not merely external reality. The Kingdom of God is within each of us. "Rather the Kingdom of God is inside of you and outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living Father." That is the unknown treasure buried in your field.

I have to admit that I find a lot of comfort in this teaching. The Kingdom of God is not dependent on the external world that is always

changing and in constant turmoil. The Kingdom of God is not about the old reality, or the liminal phase, or even the new being. The Kingdom of God is not even in the resurrection. You can see why the Gnostics were considered heretics! Rather the Kingdom of God resides in your own soul somewhere. Go find it. Go dig up that treasure that somebody planted in you. Don't worry too much about the change going on in your life. Don't neglect what matters—that sacred center in the midst of our being.

Change will rage around us. Even in the midst of stability and homeostasis we feel that little wiggle of dissatisfaction that gets us off the couch and back into the drama that is our life. Then before you know it, you are stuck in that transporter once again, not quite here and not quite there. Life is filled both with fear and great joy over the anticipation of change. That is normal. That is to be expected. But when change happens to you, just remember the Kingdom of God does not come about that way. It will not be a matter of pointing to some external reality and saying there it is or here it is. It is already here. That calmness, peacefulness, and serenity reside inside us. It is waiting to be tapped into. Jesus did it, and in at least one text says that we can too. In this Emerson would agree.

Tomorrow is going to be a big day for me. I am not entirely sure what to expect. But isn't that some of the thrill of life? Yes there is fear and anxiety around the unknown, but the great joy is that life is not one

repetitive hamster wheel throughout eternity. Change has its benefits even if it is to create some suspense. Surprises are good, and one might even argue necessary for our growth and development as healthy individuals.

So do not fear change too much. Be willing to be flexible and open to life as it is even when it is not life as we would like it to be. I will miss you over the next month. But while I am gone, if change gets too stressful for you and you are having trouble finding that treasure in your field, remember to heed the words of a wise man who said, “Live long and prosper.” Amen Blessed Be.