

**625 MILES OF YOWLING, OR:
CHANGE CAN BE DIFFICULT
June 17, 2007**

It is now almost 14 years since I made the first trip to Muskegon from Chicago. On that first visit we met together in small groups--a freshly minted Unitarian Universalist minister, and a small, feisty congregation with the goal of growth. And on that first Sunday I talked with you about change, illustrated by the trauma I imposed upon my beautiful, mild-mannered black and white cat—Joshua.

Joshua joined my family when I lived in Jackson, Mississippi, and he made the long move north to Chicago with me. He also moved with me to Rochester, New York, when I was interning in that large church. Joshua did not like to travel. He did not like his carrying case, he did not like cars, and his response was to yowl. He was a large cat, with a voice to match—no modest little “mew” for him!

Thus, when the time came to return to Chicago, I knew what to expect. I had everything ready and packed before I brought out his cage. I had the towel ready to throw over his cage, to darken it and hide the blurring images he would otherwise experience. His food and litterbox were packed—all was ready. I even succeeded in catching him before he reached the tree he was trying to climb. Joshua was a good cat—he never scratched—but he was also large. Sixteen pounds of passive resistance can prove difficult, especially when armed with five claws on each of four feet. But I succeeded in stowing him away, and we set off.

625 miles is a two-day trip when there is only one driver. The first day wasn't too bad. He only succeeded in escaping once—by slipping his collar off his head at a rest stop. Fortunately I succeeded in catching him quickly. That evening we stopped at a small motel, and Joshua settled in relatively peacefully.

But the next day! Somehow two days of travel, of constant change, was just too much. No matter how soothingly I spoke, no matter what was on the radio or tape deck, no matter how often I stopped to coax him to eat or drink—he yowled continually. I drove 275 miles that day with an incessantly yowling cat.

Even I, who love cats in general, and Joshua in particular, was about ready to lock him in the trunk by the time I reached Chicago—and then had to drive through city traffic to reach my school. Poor Joshua! Change is so difficult for him. Indeed change is difficult for all cats.

When I first told you this story, we, minister and congregation, were in the midst of change. I was entering into ministry, and you were seeking your first full-time called minister. Now we again face major transitions. For thirteen years we traveled together in relationship. Now that relationship is shifting.

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It is time to re-examine change and how it affects our lives—physically and emotionally, but most especially, spiritually.

Our instinct is to resist change, to stay with the known. Yet many of us in this liberal faith community have already made significant changes. Many of us came out of other, more traditional faiths. We found this liberal congregation, and it proved to be a saving faith for us; thus, we do not want it changed. We changed our theology, but find it more difficult to change our musical tastes—or the location in which we meet—or the shape of our worship service. We need some sort of solid ground. And yet, change is always with us.

As Heraklitos said, “Change alone is unchanging.”

I certainly had many changes in my life, from a small town Midwest upbringing to Army Officer's wife, to TV production worker, to owner and manager of a dressmaking shop, to theological school, to minister, soon to be retired. None of these changes were easy.

Perhaps one of the most difficult was the decision to go to graduate school, to leave my home and business in Jackson, Mississippi, my home church of 12 years, my friends, my network of support. My husband and I planned to make the journey together. We wanted to serve this Unitarian Universalist Association we both loved so much together.

I would go to school, while he worked the few remaining years before his retirement; and then it would be his turn. However, a drunk driver ran a stop light and into the driver's side of our car; and I found myself a widow. After recovery and consultation with ministers and lay people active in the church, I decided to go ahead with our plan on my own.

Deciding was easy—implementing this radical change was difficult. I said I was going. I talked to people at Meadville/Lombard Theological School about it. I talked to people about selling my business and my home. But somehow, I just couldn't make myself sit down and fill out the necessary paperwork. I couldn't quite make this change happen—even though I knew this was what I wanted to do.

One Sunday I was scheduled to be in charge of the program at our small fellowship. It was autumn, and I planned a harvest celebration, complete with sharing fruits of the harvest—apple cider and home-made bread enriched with dried fruits and nuts. Just before the service was to begin I went into the church kitchen to slice the bread with the very sharp serrated knife I brought with me. In the process I sliced the tip of my finger—a small portion of it was barely hanging on by a sliver of skin. As I rushed to the sink, holding the tip in place with my thumb, and turned on the cold water, I thought to myself: “Well, I had to cut myself loose from here somehow!”

A friend took me to the emergency room, where my finger was sewn back together; members of the congregation used my materials to provide a very nice service for each other; and I discovered that I was freed from whatever it was that was preventing me from making the difficult change I wanted.

I typed up my application with a bandaged finger, filled out all the forms, and by January was enrolled in theological school. 2 Change is difficult for me, and for most people. Some of us adapt to it more readily—for each of us some changes are easier than others. I have not had to cut myself off in such a drastic manner before or since! However, radical change—moving, divorce, loss (including retirement) and death are very difficult for humans. Psychologists tell us that even positive changes—promotions, marriage, new babies—cause our stress levels to rise dramatically.

Change is also difficult for institutions of all kinds. We know of the stresses our economy faces because of the changes businesses made. Jobs lost, people relocated, loss of income—our whole system is in stress. Churches too, are vulnerable to the stresses of change. We look to them to provide stability in a challenging world, thus, any change seems threatening.

While I was still a member of the small congregation in Jackson, Mississippi, we decided we needed to grow. According to demographic studies, we could have a church of 300 members, and we hovered between 35 and 50 members for almost 40 years. It was time to make a concerted effort to *grow up*. This decision was not made by a few people—we all participated. A careful process made sure that everyone's voice was heard, and the decision was clear—we needed to

grow.

So we planned a program of publicity, renovated our meeting room, and scheduled some special Visitor's Sundays. Laura, one of our old-time members, was especially concerned about our kitchen. Laura not only thinks cleanliness is next to godliness, she is convinced it is far superior. She cleaned and reorganized our whole kitchen with great enthusiasm. On the morning of our first Visitor Sunday, I walked into her domain prepared to admire her efforts.

In the middle of the kitchen floor, just where all the members and their guests would be walking on their way to get their sacred cups of coffee and the special cookies provided for this special day, was the very large metal garbage can that had previously been in the closet. I assumed it was just not yet put away and started to remedy the situation. "No!", said Laura sharply. "Leave it there. We're going to keep it out here now."

"But why?" I asked.

"When it's in the closet, people just open the door, and toss their trash in its direction," she answered. "We end up with too much on the floor. This way they will get it in the right place."

"Don't you think it might be in the way when folks come in for coffee?" I asked. "It doesn't look very attractive."

"I don't care," she answered. "They'll just have to learn where to put their trash. I'm not going to have any more trash on my floor."

I had been followed into the room by my friend, Jane, who was a direct-action type of person. "I'll take care of it," she muttered. For the next several months a quiet unspoken struggle ensued, as Jane put the garbage can into the closet at every opportunity, and Laura took it out and left it in the middle of the kitchen.

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Jane eventually won, and the garbage can again took up residence in the closet.

Laura did not recognize her action to be counter-productive to the growth we all agreed we wanted. But, knowing my friend, I was not surprised. She was "stuck" at an out-grown stage in other areas of her life. Change was very difficult for her. It often brings pain for individuals and for institutions.

My husband, John, had a very dry sense of humor. He once said, with a perfectly straight face: "The problem with change is—things just aren't the same afterward."

He was right, of course. Any change requires adjustments from everyone concerned. If a church grows it means there are new people in it. New people, with new ideas, new skills, new interests, and new needs. They may have ideas about social actions that should be done—or not done. They may have skills that enrich the available mix of talents, but require adjustments. If a skilled pianist comes in, when you already have someone used to designing the music program around his or her musical preferences, there may be clashes. If someone wants *more spirituality* in a congregation of rational humanists, there may be clashes. If a family with six children joins, with their needs for religious education, the delighted director may need to find another teacher, or two, or three. And when a minister retires, the congregation will need to get used to a different way of approaching ministry.

The relationships will all need to be re-negotiated, whether the change is new members and/or a new minister. Small churches will feel this more than large ones. In a small church everyone knows almost everyone else. They know their warts as well as their beauty spots, and probably

make allowances for them. New members require an effort on everyone's part, and some may end up with hurt feelings.

A new minister sees everything with new eyes. He may not understand why the back door remains a challenge to open. He may not understand why the front door closes with a bar, much like medieval castles. He may not understand why committee X does task Y, when there are other, maybe better, ways to organize.

It is difficult to renegotiate our relationships, when new people come into our faith community, whether members or minister. It was a huge step when this congregation called a full-time minister. And it is a huge step we face as we prepare to part after 13 years together.

Retirement will be a big change for me. I'm not going to curl up and become a couch potato, but I will have to change the structure of my week. I've got lots to keep me busy, but it will be in a different location, with a different schedule, and—most of all, it will be with different people.

And you will continue with a different minister—a minister with special training and charged with specific transition duties. If he's doing his job right, (and I think he will) there will be more changes. It may be difficult for some of you, but I know that you are strong enough and dedicated enough to meet the challenges.

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The Rev. Richard Gilbert, author of our reading, *Letting Go Over the Falls* was the minister at First Unitarian in Rochester when I interned there. He is a great mentor.

His meditation on letting go and meeting a great challenge may provide guidance as we negotiate the changes ahead. You will note that he allowed his younger and stronger sons to lead the way before he took the cold plunge. Although I am leaving, and other leaders retiring from their volunteer positions, there are others to lead you through the rapids.

Gilbert approached this challenge with caution. He says, "I slowly slid to the center of the stream, but the current did not take me. I am not certain I wanted to move." Though small in stature, my friend is a skilled runner and athlete. However, he still exercised care, and admitted a certain trepidation. "Gradually," he says, "I lost control."

He - lost - control. Man, that's a scary idea—losing control. We spend our lives trying to control the world. We try to control the production of food plants, and discover that the processes have changed our very weather patterns..... We try to control the economy, and discover that others have more influence than we. We try to control our spiritual lives, and—just when we think we have it all figured out—life intervenes and we have to re-think the whole process, or else live in dissonance.

And when we go "over the falls," we plunge into a deep, deep pool that threatens to overwhelm us. But we find that, applying our skills and effort, we come back to the top and breathe the air with joy and greater confidence.

Gilbert closes with these words:

"There is something to be said for letting go,
For risking the uncertain,
For putting oneself in strong life currents
With a rich mixture of faith and fear.
Unknown pools sustain us, buoy us;

Forgotten instincts stretch our spirits to the surface
Where the air is clear and the water cold and refreshing.”

When I finally got Joshua back to Chicago, and into his new living space, we spent some time forgiving each other. He could no longer use the cat door in his old home to go in and out as he pleased. On the other hand, the view from his window included some very chatty parrots that he could watch for many hours, probably dreaming of the damage he could do if he could only get through that glass. We spent several more years together. He is now gone, reduced to a small container of ashes, but I remember him well, and the lessons he taught me.

Now, I am looking forward to the next stage of my life. Like my mentor, I'm a little scared as I contemplate the challenges of the falls I face. I'm still climbing clumsily toward the entry point for my ride. It will not be without challenges, but I would be bored if I had none. So, I am anticipating the ride with cautious enthusiasm.

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I recommend the same for you. This congregation has more growing to do. It provides a liberal, saving faith worth sharing with others. I will be watching from the sidelines and cheering you on. There are challenges ahead, but you have the depth, the talent, and the leadership to meet them. I know that the next stage of your development will bring you into even stronger relationship with the creative force of the universe that lives and moves among us.

Shalom and Saalat.
Blessed Be and Amen.

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