



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Moving Forward”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

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Centering Thoughts

The secret of change is to focus all your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new.

Socrates

Life is a series of natural and spontaneous changes. Don't resist them – that only creates sorrow.

Let reality be reality. Let things flow naturally forward in whatever way they like. Lao Tzu

The only way to make sense out of change is to plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance.

Alan Watts

No matter whom you are or what you do, the ground is always shaky. And, the really good news is that shaky ground is fertile ground for spiritual growth and awakening. Pema Chodron

Sermon

Our Unitarian Universalist tradition teaches that there isn't just one religious truth for all people, for all time, and in all places. For this reason, Unitarian Universalism draws from many sources, including wisdom from world religions.

One Taoist and Buddhist truth seems absolute to me. It is the idea that change is the only constant in life. And, we cannot stop change from taking place.

We cannot stop the inevitable aging of our physical bodies. We may not feel the changes occurring each day, but when we look at photographs from years past, the changes cannot be denied. From the moment we're conceived we begin changing. In a typical lifespan, we're born, we grow up, and eventually, we die. Even in death our bodies change from living flesh to decaying flesh or dust and bones.

Neither can we stop the inevitable maturing of our mental and emotional selves. New knowledge, new relationships, and new experiences change us in ways we can't foresee and might not consider possible. I know I'm not the same person who arrived here seven years ago, nor are you the same. None of us remain unchanged by life.

Foolishly, I think we try to stop change all the time. We find the status quo comfortable and comforting. We depend on what we know. We like stability. We fear change because it puts

us at risk of the unknown and unwelcome. But trying to stop change also puts us at risk of losing out on something better. In Buddhist and Taoist language, our attachment to what we know prevents us from moving in harmony with change, of making the most of change. Holding off change is as futile as grasping onto a slippery rock in a raging river.

That doesn't stop me from depending on the unchanging fact of my marriage. But I'd be a fool to say my marriage hasn't changed during its 36 years. I'd be a fool to say my relationship with Paul won't change in the future. Together, we work to maintain the integrity of our marriage in the face of the changes we experience. We work to balance the demands of our jobs with the demands of our relationship, our family ties, and our personal interests. I know you perform similar balancing acts in your own lives, whether you're married or not.

Yesterday, at the newcomer orientation, I ran through some historical and theological changes that helped form Unitarian Universalism. Had it not been for new knowledge, discoveries, insights, experiences, and a willingness to change, our liberal faith would be different than it is today.

When I say liberal, keep in mind that I do not mean politically liberal, though many of us identify as such. I mean liberal as in liberty, generosity, and openness. Ours is a denomination where you are free to search for your own truth and meaning. We are open to new insight. We say 'revelation is not sealed' because new truths and wonders await our discovery.

Ours is a living tradition that has changed over time and will continue to change to meet the lives of those within it. Our faith tradition does not cling to the past, but learns from it as it moves forward.

Our Fellowship regularly faces change. You, the members and friends of UUFA, guide this change. Our congregational polity means you make the decisions. You decide how our pledge income is to be spent. You decide what our mission and vision will be. You decide what minister to call. You decide what public stands to take. You decide what change you'll welcome and what you'll resist. *But you cannot stop change.*

Those of you who have been at the Fellowship for five, twenty, even sixty years have seen many changes. We began as handful of people. Now we include over 260 adults. We began by meeting in a single room. Now we meet in a building with many rooms. We began by employing no one. Now we employ six part-time staff and one called minister. We began with little ritual, no singing, and lots of talk. Now we include more ritual, more singing, and a little less talk.

None of you could have stopped these changes. You could have made different decisions that would have created different outcomes, but UUFA would still be different from how it began.

Now this Fellowship stands at its latest decision point, a new fork in the road lies before us. One road includes expanding our parking, our meeting rooms, our offices, and our gathering spaces to help us better meet the needs of our increased programming, attendance, and demands on staff.

The second road may include less expansion, perhaps none. Both are viable roads, but neither road includes ‘no change’. Even if we make no change to the building or parking, change will still occur, just as it has in the past.

This week, as Barry indicated, he will meet with many of you to learn how financially feasible our dream project is. Welcome these meetings. Ask questions. Share your hopes and fears.

I believe the financial decisions you’ll be weighing over the next few months are also spiritual decisions. I believe your giving will reflect what this Fellowship means to you. What furthering Unitarian Universalism means to you. What importance UUFA’s open, diverse, welcoming, values-driven, spiritual or religious community and sanctuary means to you.

If our hearts prove bigger than our bank accounts, we won’t stop being who we are. If we don’t realize this expansion project, we’ll continue offering worship services, small group ministries, social justice activities, pastoral care, and religious education.

But we will continue to struggle to do all these things within the limits of this 24 year-old facility. We will continue to be the best we can be well into the future, whatever that future may be, a future that includes change we can’t predict.

Our task here, as in our own lives, is to determine whether we wish to direct the change we want to see based on our hopes or our fears. Nelson Mandela advised that our choices in life should reflect our hopes, not our fears.

Our task here, as in our own lives, is to better balance our desire for things to stay the same, or even return to some ideal we think we once were, by embracing the fact that we can’t stop change.

Our task here, as in our own lives, is to recognize we have the power to encourage the change we hope for, rather than wait for some change we can’t foresee. We have the power to direct a change that minimizes our risk and fears. We have the power to resist the seductive nature of the status quo that tries to convince us that things can stay the same. But Taoist and Buddhist wisdom reminds us this is an illusion.

Let us keep in mind the opportunity change can bring, rather than risk it might include. That way we will better balance the opposing forces of welcome and resistance to change. Let us balance all our hopes and fears so that we can make wise decisions in all aspects of our lives.

May it be so.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. Change occurs by our action and inaction. Which made the most significant change in your life?
2. What types of decisions do you find most difficult to make? How difficult are decisions about spending or donating money? What factors help you decide?
3. Our philosophical and religious beliefs change or mature over time. What particular experiences led you to new beliefs or spiritual growth—and were these changes made willingly?