

Last week I talked a little bit about how Welcoming can be a spiritual practice. When we welcome the stranger, or even someone we know, we stretch ourselves just a little beyond the comfortable. And in that stretching is growth. When we stretch ourselves for the reason of sharing our loving welcoming affirming faith that is a spiritual practice because we are deepened in the practice of that.

But I wanted to follow up a little. If we welcome others then things will change. If I welcome new folks into my circle of friends I will change. I am your new minister - this experience is going to change me, and my being your minister is going to change this congregation. Each new person who becomes part of this community changes the community and the community changes them.

WE know this even if we don't say it all that often. When we come together in small groups, and meetings we take time to let folks check in. That is a time when we can share what has been going on with us and let others in our group know how we are doing. Groups that meet regularly Religious education classes, the choir, ministry teams, staff develop cultures and personalities. But within that a RE class can feel different if certain children are missing or new ones are added. So it is helpful to give the group time to re-form each time it comes together. There is both continuity and change in our experience.

Some folks welcome change some folks are skeptical of change. But one thing we know change happens. We can't stop it. We can embrace it, we can deny it, but we can't stop it. At best maybe we can slow it. But change happens relentlessly.

Many years ago I was a philosophy major in college. I learned a lot I learned that philosophers can talk - a lot. But in different classes we talked about change. One

would not think that that was such a difficult subject. Intuitively we know that people change and yet they keep an ongoing identity. Lovingly I say that sometimes philosophers have a hard time explaining the obvious.

It all started with Parmenides and his student Zeno. Parmenides argued that motion was simply an illusion. His student Zeno posited If I have to travel from the start of a race to the finish then first I must travel one half of that race but before I travel that one half I must travel half of that. There is an infinite regress of halves to be traveled and so I can never get to the finish line. Later Aristotle would argue that clearly we finish races so motion is possible.

Also Parmenides posited that change was impossible. He argued that being must come from non-being. If I grow tall I must be first not-tall but how can something come from nothing? (<http://skepticalphilosopher.blogspot.com/2008/08/parmenides-refutation-of-change.html>)

Parmenides seemed to think in absolutes - you were either tall or not tall. Parmenides assumed that all change must be *absolute* change and so rejected change altogether. He assumed that for the world to be comprehensible it must be *completely* comprehensible

(from skeptical philosopher blog
<http://skepticalphilosopher.blogspot.com/2008/08/parmenides-refutation-of-change.html>)

But he was able to point to something. We struggle with change and identity - if something changes enough is it still itself?

In my logic class we talked about change and self identity. The question went something like this - Lets say a church has an organ. It is a lovely organ but it periodically needs repairs and updating. Each time the repair person comes in and replaces a piece the old piece is put in the back store room - Logical story so far right because churches don't throw anything away right? After a long time all the parts of the original organ have been replaced. And after an even longer time an enterprising young person finds her way into the store room and sees all the parts and constructs a fully functional organ in the back store room of the church - an exact duplicate of the one in the church sanctuary - which organ is the church organ. The one in the sanctuary or the one in the back room. Honestly I don't remember the answer. My response was something more like - "Cool that church doubled its resources!"

No matter what answers philosophers come to we know that change happens. For the past few weeks each person from this community that I have met has told me in different ways how this community has changed, is changing and how they want the congregation to change in the future.

And actually folks talk to me about how they want this church to grow. People have talked to me about how the **income** side of the budget needs to grow - that 17,000 dollar gap has to come from somewhere! People are a little worried about the money but people are **more** excited about other kinds of growth. Consistently people talk to me about how they want more folks involved in this community. More people in worship, more children

in Religious Education, more people enjoying our adult education offerings. I'd like to see more of all us volunteer in the Religious Education classes. Do you know that Our classes start next Sunday and Tina does not yet have near enough volunteers for this fall. What a wonderful way to get to know our newest UUs - what a wonderful way to share our faith - and kids are fun! This is an unabashed advertisement for youth Religious Education here. Talk to Tina about what you can do to help. Maybe just a Sunday or two. Help us be the best that we can be by being part of Religious Education.

Here is what I like best - what I hear people saying is we are a great community - we have great people here - and we have a great UU message - we want to get that out to folks. It is great to hear people feeling positive about this place and their faith. And we do have something important to offer the world beyond these walls.

But it does kind of beg the question how is growth different than change? Because you know we could change this place but not really grow and we could grow in numbers but not really change.

A few years ago one of the congregation members here, Grant Reeher, asked me to be part of a debate around the issue of increasing taxes on the wealthy. I was on stage with a Professor from SU also former director of the Tax Policy Center, two folks with advanced degrees in economics who worked at political think tanks, John DeFrancisco and Eliot Spitzer. No I

wasn't intimidated or nervous. It was a wonderful experience. I remember thinking at the time that there is my comfort zone (indicate with my hands) and growth (indicate an area far away from comfort zone).

And I think that is really really true. change happens - it can happen when we are in our comfort zone and it can happen outside of our comfort zone. But growth really happens outside of our comfort zone when we have to do or learn something different.

If we stay in our comfort zone we will never be like that church sexton who thought outside the box handed him. He questioned he wondered and then he checked it out. He did not fix something that was broken he found out it wasn't broken to begin with. because he did not simply accept things as they always had been.

Sometimes it is just easier to put up with the inconvenience than to fix a problem. Inertia is a powerful force. And A problem may seem more complex than it is. After all lights that have not worked for decades - that could be a complicated wiring issue that we don't have the time or money to fix.

And we who belong to churches we find ourselves at a time of great complexity.

churches are at a turning point a fulcrum point. Gone is the time when everybody just came to church. Gone is the time when young adults returned to church when they had children. Some do for sure but not the bulk. We are simply not a church centric culture anymore. Starting in 2003 the Southern Baptists started losing members instead of gaining. And they have continued that every year since. Conservative churches get a lot of media attention but they are also struggling to keep members as are others. Presbyterians lost 98,000 members last year alone. about a 5% drop nationwide. Catholics are struggling UCC are struggling.

We UUs we have shrink compared to where we were 20 years ago but in the past few years we are holding our own. In a time when most churches are declining we are not. This is positive. I think it points to the fact that we have something folks are looking for.

Carey McDonald, who works with the larger UUA national staff as the Director of Outreach recently talked about young adults those folks who are somewhere between 20 and 35 or so. In a study done of young adult christians who were leaving church - now this is not UU young adult but it is the same cohort. There were 6 top reasons these young adults were leaving their churches:

- Churches are overprotective
- judgmental around sexuality
- antagonistic to science
- exclusive about theology
- unfriendly to those in doubt
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Boy do we have a church for them. Really doesn't this sound like us?

This, Carey, says is why we are not losing members as a denomination. We have the gold standard in sexuality curriculum - Our Whole Lives, we are on the forefront of marriage equality and LGBTQ issues, and where else would you see a church encouraging their junior high youth in a Coming of Age class to share their beliefs or their doubts as Credo statements? We are doing a lot right.

But the 6th reason is one we need to pay attention to - these young adult Christians site that their experience of church has been shallow. They want something that has meaning and depth, something that engages their whole selves, not simply their brain, and not simply their heart. They want a church experiences that does more than entertain. They want a church experience that challenges them to think deeper, feel deeper, and act with integrity. They want a church that follows them into the world that they live in. They want a church experience that is relevant.

Carey goes onto say that this is why we are not growing. How we organize church, how we worship on Sunday, how we treat each other, how we welcome in the stranger, how we communicate, how we are in the world has not kept up with the changes in the world and the generation that is following us. And Carey goes on to help us understand that this is not pandering to one age group over another. This is really a universal design concept of church. How can we plan and live out our faith in community in a way that has an aesthetic and is usable to the greatest extent possible by everyone, regardless of their age?

Think about what you want in a church community wouldn't it be a place that

- is affirmative of you as a person
- is open and non judgmental in regards to sexuality welcoming to all
- is sympathetic to science and uses it in sermons and religious education
- is inclusive to a variety of theologies

- is encouraging to folks on different spiritual paths
- has a depth of experience that is shared with all
- and that makes a difference in the world.

This is what I mean by growth. Sure I would like to see more people in our pews in our RE classes. I would like to see the financial support of this place increase so that we can pay our bills without making our staff nervous, and our Board worried. But more than that this is the growth I want to see I want us to be - affirming welcoming inquisitive, encouraging relevant deep.

I want people to leave here from a meeting, a concert, a discussion, a Sunday service saying I want to go back. I learned something, I met someone, I made a connection, I am a better person because I went to First UU.