

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Sunday 16 March 2008

Constants May Evolve

The Reverend Victoria Safford

WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
328 MAPLE STREET MAHTOMEDI, MINNESOTA 55115
651/ 426-2369 safford@whitebearunitarian.org

FIRST READING from Rumi,

philosopher and poet, born in the 13th century in what is now Iran or Afghanistan

I died as a mineral and became a plant,
I died as plant and rose to animal,
I died as animal and I was Man.
Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?
Yet once more I shall die as Man, to soar
With angels blest; but even from angelhood
I must pass on: all except God doth perish.
When I have sacrificed my angel-soul,
I shall become what no mind e'er conceived.
Oh, let me not exist! for Non-existence
Proclaims ... 'To Him we shall return.'
To the One we shall return.

SECOND READING from Jean Vanier

He is a Roman Catholic writer, and the founder of L'Arche, a network of more than one hundred communities in thirty countries for people with intellectual disabilities.

In human beings, there is a constant tension between order and disorder, connectedness and loneliness, evolution and revolution, security and insecurity. Our universe is constantly evolving: the old order gives way to a new order and this in its turn crumbles when the next order appears. It is no different in our lives in the movement from birth to death.

Change of one sort or another is the essence of life, so there will always be the loneliness and insecurity that come with change. When we refuse to accept that loneliness and insecurity are part of life, when we refuse to accept that they are the price of change, we close the door on many possibilities for ourselves: we are less than fully human. If we try to prevent or ignore the movement of life, we run the risk of falling into the inevitable depression that must accompany an impossible goal. Life evolves; change is constant. When we try to prevent the forward motion of life, we may succeed for awhile, but inevitably, there is an explosion; the groundswell of life's constant movement, constant change, is too great to resist.

Empires of ideas, as well as empires of wealth and power, come and go. To live well is to observe in today's apparent order the tiny anomalies that are the seeds of change, the harbingers of the order of tomorrow. Those who have eyes to see this new order as it arises will often be alone or persecuted, because they are considered too revolutionary, too modern, too liberal. [Perhaps this is so. But even as they embrace new possibility, these so-called radicals are holding to old principles] : openness, love, wholeness, unity, hope, the human potential for healing and redemption, and most important, the constant necessity for forgiveness. Everything that permits and encourages the flow of life and growth is necessary.

CONSTANTS MAY EVOLVE

What happens when everything you knew to be true turns out to be otherwise; or some one thing you believed in with heart and mind and soul and strength begins little by little to disintegrate, so that you can't hang your hope, or your faith or confidence on that thing anymore, and you need to find another thing, another absolute truth, to guide you; or some reality that you thought really just "goes without saying" turns out instead to simply go away? This can happen in all kinds of ways. What happens when some discouragement you've known, some loneliness or grief, some cynical conclusion or tiredness of spirit, some bitterness, a habit of apathy, starts cracking apart, in spite of you, imperceptibly at first, then all in a rush, like ice on a lake, like frozen soil in the yard gone muddy and soft when water starts moving, like sap that rises one night in a tree that looked dead? What happens when, just when you thought you were settled, fully grown, all established - in your mind your knowledge, your body, your wisdom, your heart -- your life comes pounding on the door, announcing that it's time to change, time to grow again? How do you answer the door?

I've been re-reading a beautiful memoir by Jean-Dominique Bauby. He was editor of *Elle*, the French fashion magazine, talented, bright, the father of two children, at home in his glittering, hip Parisian world, when at the age of 43 he suffered a stroke that left him completely and irreversibly paralyzed. He could hear, and he could see (out of one of his eyes), but he could no longer speak nor move. In a single instant, his life changed utterly. His brain was left intact and somehow, a brilliant nurse and a brilliant therapist attending him discovered that he could communicate with them by blinking his left eye in response to yes-or-no questions, and eventually to recitations of the alphabet, over and over: he blinked when the letter he needed was spoken, and built words that way, and then sentences and paragraphs, whole essays in his mind that were transcribed on their pads of paper, and in time became a memoir. (*The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* was made into a film last year.) The book is a chronicle of transformations, from "normal" life to absolute, unimaginable catastrophe (the end of that life and the end of all imaginable futures); from the moment of disaster to an utterly diminished existence, locked within a useless body; and from that complete diminishment to a fierce, full flowering of the mind and the spirit, which somehow Bauby was able to enlarge and to express. There was the outward, physical transformation, over which he had no control, and then came this inward, metaphysical change, not to a different personality than he'd had before, but to a deeper one, and even he didn't know to what extent his own will was or was not involved in that changing. Bauby wrote that his imagination was traveling to exotic places it had never been before,

and not only did it travel broadly, like a butterfly, far beyond the confines of his shriveled physical world, but it also traveled deeply, down to levels of understanding within himself that he had never plumbed before, nor ever cared to. In one place he wrote about friendship, and how before he'd always just enjoyed his social life, his many friends, but now he understood, and cherished, certain principles, like fidelity, compassion, generosity, honesty, all of which were becoming part of his evolving definition of human love. (It had been a smaller, thinner definition before.) He thought that no matter what, these intangible principles might survive.

I receive remarkable letters, he wrote. They are opened for me, unfolded and spread out before my eyes in a daily ritual that gives the arrival of the mail the character of a hushed and holy ceremony. I carefully read each letter myself. Some of them are serious in tone, invoking the supremacy of the soul, the mystery of every existence. And by a curious reversal, the people who focus most closely on those fundamental questions tend to be people I had known only superficially. Their small talk had masked hidden depths. Had I been blind and deaf, or does it take the harsh light of disaster to show a person's true nature?

Other letters simply relate the small events that punctuate the passage of time: roses picked at dusk, the laziness of a rainy Sunday, a child crying himself to sleep... These small slices of life, these small gusts of happiness, move me more deeply than all the rest. I hoard them like treasure. One day I hope to fasten them end to end in a half-mile streamer, to float in the wind like a banner raised to the glory of friendship.

Jean-Dominique Bauby died two years after his stroke, and ten days after his book was published.

Is there anything at all that you can say is permanent in this life, fixed and certain, reliable? Anything you know for sure to be true? What solid ground do you believe you're planted on right now? Maybe you have always believed that getting the fashion magazine to the printer on deadline is the most important thing in the world, and then one day, *for whatever reason*, you wake up and understand that you have been mistaken all along, that in fact, not only now but even before, the most important thing was your connection to other people. Or your connection to God. Or your connection to love of life. Or to wonder. Every once in a while we realize that things are constantly in flux – and our own sure knowledge, our own

perspective and perceptions, our own hard-won beliefs and ways of seeing, may be among the things that change.

It's not only disaster that awakens us.

A poet writes about depression, about how the illness has subtly but surely descended and now defines every aspect of her life:

*No matter what the grief, its weight,
we are obliged to carry it.
We rise and gather momentum, the dull strength
that pushes us through crowds.
And then the young boy gives me directions
so avidly. A woman holds the glass door open,
waits patiently for my empty body to pass through.
All day it continues, each kindness
reaching toward another – a stranger
singing to no one as I pass on the path, trees
offering their blossoms, a retarded child
who lifts his almond eyes and smiles.
Somehow they always find me, seem even
to be waiting, determined to keep me
from myself, from the thing that calls to me
as it must have once called to them –
this temptation to step off the edge
and fall weightless, away from the world.*

[Dorianne Laux, “For the Sake of Strangers”]

For her, the one sure thing is her illness, the shroud of depression, this heavy, suffocating cloak. This is the ground of reality, permanent, pervasive, absolute. There is nothing else to put her faith in. She is “obliged to carry it.” And yet – every day all these tiny expressions of kindness, these almost invisible signs of beauty and love, keep assailing her despair, relentlessly; people she doesn't even know, strangers, slice slashes in the shroud and force shafts of blinding, undeniable sunlight through the seams; they threaten her known world – which is a gray, flat world – with color and light and signs of life. In spite of herself she notices. In spite of the illness, she feels something stirring, enough perhaps to save her, to pull

her back from the perilous edge. What happens when everything you knew to be true turns out to be otherwise? What happens when you realize there are hairline fractures in the ice?

I remember some years ago someone speaking in the “Circle of Laments.” This is the evening service we’ve held for several years now on the Thursday before Easter, to mark, as so many traditions do, this threshold moment in the year, just before spring shows its face. Those gathered are invited to share their sorrows and their fears, the dark night of the soul, the winter of the heart. Out of the silence, out of the candlelight, a woman spoke about living with chronic illness for a long time. She said her doctors may have found a way to treat it; they were very hopeful, and so was she, for the first time in years. But she said that in recent days she’d been overcome with something like sadness, something like fear. “After all this time, I think I’m scared of being well,” she said. “I’m not sure I’ll know who I am if I get better.” That was such a strange, courageous, honest thing to say.

What happens when the landscape of our known world changes? Jean Vanier says in his book, *Becoming Human*, “the universe is constantly evolving: the old order gives way to a new order and this in its turn crumbles when the next order appears. It is no different in our lives. Change is the essence,” he says, and it is the both most constant and the hardest thing, and thus,” he says, “whatever the change, there will always be some loneliness, [some loss], and some insecurity...” To accept these as our constant companions, to know they will always be with us, and therefore know that everybody walks with them, everyone a little lonely and unsteady and therefore in need of compassion, this is to travel through life with grace and courage. Change is the essence, and “everything that permits and encourages the flow of life and growth is necessary,” even if, even when, for each of us the final physical change is death. “When we try to prevent the forward motion of life, we may succeed for a while, but inevitably, there is an explosion; the groundswell of life’s constant movement is too great to resist.” The question really is, how will you yourself evolve? What will become of you in the lifelong process of becoming? Do you find your heart and your mind, your spirit, your attitude, opening up or closing down when things begin, as they always do, for better and for worse, to crack apart?

A member here, Al Mitchell, told me a while back about work he did more than 20 years ago in another religious community . He was part of a delegation sent by his church to Central America in the 1980’s, part of that movement begun by

progressive Catholics to stand in the gap between US policy and the real lives and real deaths of people in countries where terrible transformations were underway. Al returned to his own real life different than he'd been before, different now for the rest of his life. He shared a poem written by Mary Ann Lundy, one of the leaders of that team:

*We are back now – the 23 of us –
Newly born again to life
to struggle and to pain
we never knew before.*

*Led into life
by those who live daily with death
fed by the hungry
who took our white hands
uncalloused
into theirs, dry and gnarled and brown*

*They took us in, strangers,
into barren huts
With shy smiles
They shared their sparse lives.*

*Don't, we beg you, ask us
if we had a "good time."
It was painful, stabbing,
The ache will burn within us,
haunting our safe American dreams*

*For you, the Lost of the Earth, have found us,
moved us to reality
And in the finding,
Perhaps, just perhaps,
have saved us.*

Transformation comes unbidden usually. We don't expect to change and be changed, to be born again, made over, torn apart and reconstructed. How does that happen, that miracle, that harsh, amazing grace? How are we ever brave enough?

Some time ago I clipped an article about an international team of astrophysicists that claims to have discovered that the basic laws of nature may be changing very slightly as the universe unfolds. It is, says the reporter, “a finding that could rewrite physics textbooks and challenge fundamental assumptions about the workings of the cosmos.” Apparently, by studying *the behavior of atoms in gas clouds 12 billion light years away from Earth (!)*, the team has seen particles doing things they could only do if certain “laws,” once thought to be immutable (the speed of light, for example), are in fact not fixed but evolving over time. In other words, says one scientist, “constants may evolve” as the universe ages and expands – principles and laws once thought to be, once *proven* to be, unchanging and unchangeable, may be something else entirely. The very way that literally everything hangs together may be changing all the time.

One Nobel Laureate says that on a scale of 1 to 10 the importance of this is definitely a “10.” Another says “People should pay attention to this.” I’m not sure *why*, exactly we should pay attention, nor how we’d actually do so; I know that I’m not qualified to appreciate the implications here sufficiently -- but I clipped the story anyway, because the thought of it is thrilling (in a distant kind of way). It reminds me of Galileo, and it reminds me of Charles Darwin and so many scientists, explorers, radical reformers, philosophers, poets, artists, of anyone who’s ever had a new or original idea and taken time to think it through, to do the math, to work it out, and then announce to the skeptical, dubious, often hostile world: “Things may not be as they seem. You thought things were set in stone, but there’s water moving under the rock. Tiny new green plants are pushing the stones of reality apart.” It reminds me of everyone who’s ever brave enough to look upon the day with curious, wide open, questioning eyes. It reminds me of people who define religion not as a tightly wrapped package of set doctrines and laws, but as a lifelong invitation to grow a larger soul, even though there may be terrible risks and profound losses in the process... And it reminds me of people I’ve known, some of you included, who maybe didn’t choose to have the rug of reality pulled out from under them, didn’t choose to have their world turned upside down and inside out, by illness, say, or mental illness, or the death of a loved one, or some other disaster, the loss of a job, the loss of a friendship, the shaking of faith, all of those who by grace or by their will or both somehow continue living and loving, and growing and evolving, even as the tectonic plates underneath their lives are shifting. The very laws of nature shift and bend, apparently, and amazingly, human

beings can change as well. We change and heal, repent and forgive, grow and evolve, as well.

In our part of the world, this is an unsettling time of year. I open the door and hunker down, all clenched against the cold, and get halfway to the mailbox before I realize that I really don't need to do that anymore; it's 50 degrees outside. Except when it's 20 degrees outside. It's raining. It's snowing. It's melting. It's freezing. And who knows what next week bring? The children will come in their straw hats, white gloves and little clip-on ties, chocolate rabbits in their pockets, melting all over our new furniture; there'll be Easter music in the air – and maybe daffodils and crocuses will bloom, and maybe there will be a mighty blizzard. This is the time of shifting certainties, just before the cracking of the ice, the quacking of the ducks in every puddled parking lot. Kurt Vonnegut called this time of year “Unlocking.” It's good practice for what our lives are like throughout the whole rest of the year, an unending series of surprises, welcome and unwelcome.

In the Christian calendar it's Lent right now, the time of waiting without waiting, the season of vacancy and tension before a mighty transformation. The story has it that Jesus both knew, and didn't fully know, how profoundly the old order was shifting. As he rode into Jerusalem with all the people cheering, he knew, and didn't fully know, couldn't possibly have known, what the days ahead would bring. In the Jewish calendar this year Passover arrives a little later, and with this same, universal theme: the people barely understand how radically the laws governing their universe, the reality governing their lives, is changing – the Exodus from slavery into Canaan takes them forty years, and most of them believe that the desert time, wandering in the wilderness, is the only life they'll ever know, the only life there is.

Constants, say the scientists, evolve. What's news to the astronomers, we've known all along. Change is the essence, and “everything that permits and encourages the flow of life and growth is necessary,” muddy as it is. Things fall apart, things open up, empires - and empires of the heart - rise and fall. The only thing that doesn't change, and never will as far as I can see, is the requirement that we go gently, that we be gentle with each other, and generous, compassionate, patient, forgiving ourselves over and over, forgiving each other again and again, as we and each other as we go along.

Hundreds of years ago, without the benefit of astrophysics, unacquainted with the speed of light, the mystic Rumi spoke of evolution:

*I died as a mineral and became a plant,
I died as plant and rose to animal,
I died as animal and I was Man. [I was woman.]
Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?
Yet once more I shall die,
and even from angelhood pass on:
all except God perishes.
When I have sacrificed my angel-soul,
I shall become what no mind ever conceived.
To the One we shall return.*

Everything is changing.