

Sunday Sept 26th
'Living in an ever changing world'
Rev Chip Wright

It is always difficult to change or at least a challenge. Even when we know we should it can be a difficult task?

Many of you have heard me say that one of the most common fears in this nation is public speaking. And that is true. There have been numbers of surveys over many years which confirm this. And yet there are always those who have little or no difficulty in speaking publicly. But for the majority of us this is not the case. Why, well because it is more difficult to transcend some behavioral fears than others.

The fear of public speaking though common can be addressed through various techniques. There are practices like reading poetry aloud or short stories, drama classes, Community Theater and singing all which help in moderating this fear. These are tools with a common thread which is practice coupled with support.

Now it is not quite as easy as this with that other fear so common in the human experience; even more universal than fear of public speaking; that is the fear of change.

We don't normally call it a fear however, but that is what it is. Mostly we engage our fears around change with responses such as: I've always done it this way, or that is not the right way, it is supposed to be done like this!!! Rarely do we hear:

"It won't be like it was if that happens. I'll have to change and adapt. I'm afraid that this will not be easy to do."

Now this kind of response is a much more honest reaction to fears of change. And accurate in admitting that it is an effort to change often.

I give as exhibit A one of my most recent adventures with change. While napping on the beach in Bolinas my Blackberry slipped out of my pocket and before I noticed, after leaving the beach, the tide had come in and washed it away. So I went immediately to get a new Blackberry.

There was a young man working at the AT&T store and when I told him what I wanted and how important my Blackberry was to my work and why, he told me that I should change to an iPhone because it was a much better tool for the job I needed it to do, and besides it was on sale and less than half the price of the Blackberry.

This scared me right away; I was comfortable with my Blackberry and had learned most the tricks I needed. And though I hate to admit it, knowing that Obama used a Blackberry, there were some identity issues at play as well.

But this young man was persuasive as he showed me all the things the iPhone could do and all the apps that were available and all the rest. In the end I got the iPhone, knowing full well I was in for some frustrating learning curves. But the potential available in this change made that worth the effort.

Now of course there are some drawbacks. With my Blackberry I had no apps to deal with. And looking through the apps store on my iPhone is like looking around in a discount shoe store the size of a shopping mall in Chicago – organized around color not size. Or at least it first felt like that until with use I found the ways to make it work for me.

It seems strange on its face that changes should evoke fear, because change is so ever present and responsible for much of the joy and other positives in life. Without change we would never know the beauty of a sunset or the excitement of a growing child, that feeling of anticipation or expectation. All this and so much more is directly connected to change. Without change we would never learn or come to understand.

Still change is often one of the most feared things in our experience.

This is a paradox for sure because most often change is undeserving of fear. Very often change can make our experience of life deeper and more meaningful.

So what is it about change that makes us so uncomfortable, and often so reluctant to go with it? Well for me often it is about having to shift from a place of comfort and familiarity to one of challenge and unfamiliarity. Sometimes it is about not wanting to let go of something I may assume or some way of thinking about something.

But when I actually look at my responses and really think about them, I have to admit they are very often rooted in fear; fear of not being right, fear of having to change, fear of having to understand my identity in new ways that are comfortable and safe. Kind of funny when one thinks about it because all this stuff of change is constantly in play in life. It never stops as much as we like to think it does.

So for me over the years I have learned some tools to help me recognize when I react to change through fear. One of these is a discipline that is akin to sitting across the room and watching yourself as you react, a kind of observation of your own ego. This is not as difficult as it sounds with a little practice, and some tips on how to access this perspective.

Anyway, what I have found over the years in doing this practice is that more often than not there really is no threat and my fear is unfounded.

In turn I have come to believe that we can use the energy of change in many positive and productive ways, but we tend not to. We often shut change off out of hand because of unfounded fear and dismiss it before it can show us its gifts.

As mammals, we have very deeply rooted fear responses, ancient programming that was set in place millions of years ago. We all have a trigger response to change associated with our evolutionary hard wiring.

But we also have millenniums of further evolution of our brain giving us the ability to reason through and understand things. This can free us from the ancient fright and flight response if we choose to use it in this way. Just knowing this can be the first tool in a self-discipline that can help us transcend unfounded fear of change and learn to embrace it as the gift it is.

Certainly all change is not necessarily good. Not in the ways we think of good and bad at least, and there is no reason to change just for the sake of change. Still recognizing and engaging with the changes which can and do benefit us personally, our community of care, and the world at large, make us more effective and help us to grow.

The vast majority of change going on in life is of benefit in one way or another and it is up to us to recognize and optimize this. Wouldn't it be great to move comfortably within changes as they present themselves; to be able to live in an ever changing world and understand how to use it to the benefit of all?

Well I believe we can. I also believe that as caring human beings, coming into balance with this ever changing world will benefit all in the long and the short term. If we make the effort to engage with new ideas and peoples as a religious community, reaching inside to pull this relationship from the depths of our being, we will not only change ourselves for the better but radiate a universal effect far beyond our own walls.

As a religious community which holds covenant to respect the inherent dignity in all life we must take the steps to evolve into a more caring and compassionate future. This inevitably will mean learning to live in an ever changing world, unafraid. We must challenge ourselves to let go of the fear of change. To stir up the forces that drives a better future rather than side stepping for a false sense of comfort and security.

Besides the tools of self-observation, there are a number of things we can ask of ourselves to help in this work. These are things that if we act on will open us wider and give us new strength in this ever changing world.

One of these is very important in an institutional setting like this. It is to be able to set aside all traditional assumptions. In other words to understand that a community of people is a living and moving entity, with rhythms and pauses. That it is made up of individuals each with a unique way of being in the world; that each and every personality brings with it an array of different capabilities and skills.

In a congregation such as ours there is a wide swath of capability and interests. So in turn there are also numbers of differing ways of doing things. The trick is organizing changes in ways that benefit the whole while supporting the individuals that offer their skill. To do this we must understand that skills people bring do not necessarily come with identical tools for the job, and possibly not the ones you would bring. Understanding this and trusting this dynamic not only supports positive change but to opens opportunities to share what you know and see in ways you never thought.

The next thing we can do to help live positively with change is to try and identify resources we can bring to use in the new imagined models. Here the challenge is to look at the change and see how we might be able to support it. It is important to think about things in new ways. And let's face it, that is a real challenge for anyone. So don't think that any of this is going to be easy. Again this is a place where sitting across the room and watching yourself can be of tremendous help.

Another thing that can be of support in learning to live with change is to simply remember that no system is sacrosanct and that new solutions are possible. This is a very simple idea but one we have real difficulty truly digesting.

I certainly know I do. I have ways of doing things that are the right way. But I also know that there are ways of doing almost everything that are not the ways I would do it-- and they work?

We need to learn to let go of identity in this way and trust the diversity of the world we live in. Trust that there are many ways to approach a task or an idea that can bring forward a positive outcome.

So this one is worth repeating over and over, particularly for an entity that has a tendency to fall back into the “ We have always done it this way” model.

“No system is sacrosanct and new solutions are possible” Let’s all repeat that together “No system is sacrosanct and new solutions are possible”

Still, Nothing is simple. Tools are needed.

So we need to be very conscious of finding and using the new tools we will identify and put to work, and then cautious not to slip back into old systems. I do not mean that history does not teach us things, it certainly does. Still we must never forget that change is not only our companion on the journey but our benefactor as well. That new models call for new ways of seeing. The old ways may seem comfortable but are not tooled to bring a future to the present. To do this one must trust change and step forward and support it.

In the end the lesson as well as the gift of growing into a comfortable relationship with change, is to find that variety and unity go together, and so doing bring more to the table of life than succumbing to the fears of losing what you have, at the cost of neglecting what you can become.

Living in a constantly changing world can bring challenges, but without change we have no hope or joy. So embracing the change that is ever-present. Learning how to live in relationship with it can and will help us all change our world and the world at large!

So be it.