

When Change Comes Calling

What a life! What a life! As I sit here at my desk this morning, the story about the shooting of 27 children and adults in a small town in Connecticut has taken the place of the heavy influx of ads for Christmas. It may be comforting to think that this is a new phenomenon but this kind of thing has been happening for years—in Scotland, Scandinavia, Australia, South Africa, in the United States. It seems as if the change being forced on us is the recognition of mental illness and its pervasiveness. Coupled with the easy access of guns we are in a quandary as to what action we could take to solve the problem. The ache I feel, similar to that of others world-wide seems too large to be manageable.

What a life! What a life! Can life be any more chaotic than it is today? Life as we know it is in an eddy of change which threatens to pull us into directions and circumstances which produce confusion, fear, and distress. We are being bombarded daily with provocations here at home and abroad that cause us to question life and our security. Perhaps you have, like me, wondered how much more we can take, what else is out there---out there ready to shake us to the rafters?

The philosopher, Heraclitus, said

“there is nothing permanent except change”,

and Marcus Aurelius wrote—

“Is any man afraid of change? Why, what can take place without change?”

These quotations remind us that observing the prevalence of change has been part of human endeavor for a very long time. However, it is also my observation that most of the time, many of us are seriously resistant to change, even to the point of hating it with a passion. Don't tell us that change will demand more sacrifice, and please omit the possibility of deprivation, of having to do without things that give us status and pleasure. Of course we like the changes that require nothing of us and will seemingly do us no harm, especially if those changes bring us things we value: such as renewed health, more money and access to power and ease.

But one thought recently captured my imagination. I began to wonder about the many people in the world who have had to face change for centuries, and I wondered what they could teach us about that challenge. It was not difficult to find this history at all. Before I share these stories with you remember that I am not granting sainthood to these groups since many of them, like us, must have been guilty of forgetting their ideals more often than they would care to admit.

As good a place as any to begin is with the Jewish Scriptures and the story of the Israelites departing Egypt. Do you remember the story of their enslavement and deprivation and how they prayed that God would bring about their freedom? Well, they were able to escape under the leadership of Moses but almost immediately, the difficulties they were facing in the desert had them moaning and grumbling and **longing** for the life they had in Egypt. Longing for the life of enslavement they long dreamed of escaping! Yes, we too have that tendency-----not only do we want change now, but please, please, let it be easy and pleasant.

But there have been times in our human history when we have had modeled for us another way of being. A few years ago we spent three weeks in South Africa, Mandela's country is how I think of it. There were still millions of people with great needs and seeing them caused my heart to hurt. But what was our greatest impression? The joy, the gentleness and the willingness to share what little they had. Even on our visit to Robben Island where Mandela was held for 30 plus years, the guides who had been former prisoners with Mandela, were warm and fearless in attitude. How could that be when their experience of constant threats of death with torture and deprivation had been 20-30 years long? They valued life with dignity more, and utilized that hope to gain the moral ground and respect of their people and the world.

I think of the Japanese and their recent tsunami and earthquake, and nuclear meltdown. Having all those nuclear reactors was the epitome of modernity—a way of declaring “we are with it!” Watching that devastation reminded me of how quickly change can happen, with what speed life as we know it can disappear. While we were not having the experience, so far as is evident, the pain and sense of loss touched us to the core. The interviews

were distressingly sorrowful, but those that moved me deeply were the survivors who were able to respond with gratitude for the safety of their friends, in spite of their own extensive personal losses. A good half a country lost to contamination, another tangle with nuclear destruction---how much can a people take?

Or think of the Native Peoples of this land. Legend has it that they were expecting visitors so that when the Europeans arrived they thought that a promised dream had come true. But nothing went as expected and the result was a near total loss of land, decimation of the groups, suffering of immense proportions. No amount of praying and fighting would change the course of things----all seemed lost, and life as they knew it would never be the same. But they bent, and adjusted, and adapted. When even their language seemed almost as forgotten as much of their culture, a new generation dug deep, found a renewed spirit in relearning their languages and rediscovering their religion and soul. One might say that change put them in a spin and in it they found renewal and a future of hope. They have also discovered that recovery can take a very long time, with set backs and dead ends, with frustratingly small successes. But more than that, they have rediscovered the pride of their group and the value of unity and perseverance.

It seems obvious that each day has its challenges. How will we live? Will we spend our time imagining the worst case scenarios and huddling in fear of their possible occurrence and what may befall us? Considering the possibilities, will we huddle in our homes, afraid of going about our business, afraid of each other? What will we tell ourselves and our children as we try to live through incredibly difficult times? What a life! As the Israelites had to learn, comforts do not often come with change and we cannot have it both ways, we must leave one to reach another. The Jewish experience through history has been notable for showcasing a people whose determination to survive is matched by their willingness to share their stories and gifts. Most of the time change will suddenly be thrust upon us, without time to decide and consider and choose--- not a bad thing since most of us need that kind of surprise to move our minds, hearts and bodies.

Radical change flowed in on the tide and changed the states of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. Shocking change came through the hands of a

quiet and unassuming young man to the residents of a quiet residential Newtown. Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, in her book, Kitchen Table Wisdom, compares life to a jigsaw puzzle saying: *“We are always putting the puzzle together without knowing the picture ahead of time.”* She says that *she has been with people in times of profound loss and grief when an unsuspected meaning begins to emerge from the fragments of their lives. Over time, this meaning has proven itself to be durable and trustworthy, even transformative. It is a kind of strength that never comes to those who deny their pain.”* She reports that one patient decided that *“when you are walking on thin ice, you might as well dance.”*

I am inspired to add that we often dance with tears in our eyes and with broken hearts because we must go on. I have been particularly drawn to the Serenity Prayer in recent years. And how often I have had to say as a matter of affirmation and to garner courage---God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change. It has certainly come in handy with the downturn of the economy, the sale of our business in a less than profitable time, the surprise visit of death and a rare disease. Yes, I certainly have needed to accept the things I could not change. In the process, I too have chosen dancing, after crying I will admit. I am learning to be grateful to be able to hear the music in spite of everything.

I believe that is what we can learn from people the world over who have had years and years of learning to accept difficulties in their lives. I believe we have much to learn from those who continue to be joyful, who keep on going, who do what they can to change what they can, who are generous with what little they have. In spite of the failing economy, many of us still have plenty compared to the rest of the world so full of want and deprivation. I remind myself when I listen to the rancor against those who are hungry and homeless and mentally ill and living in poverty, that there is room for me to do something, that I am called to act in some small way.

The Circle of Life, heard in the Lion King and written by Elton John, reminds us:

*It's the Circle of Life, and it moves us all,
Through despair and hope, through faith and love,
'Til we find our place on the path unwinding,
In the circle, the circle of life.*

How will we find our place in that circle of life unless we dig deeper to find our resilient selves, our generous selves, our grateful selves, our dancing selves? It is possible to do so---communities, the world over have been doing so for a very long time, some through faith in God, and some through the life force of community building. Choices and need often determine where one finds refuge. We need not arrogantly presume we have nothing more to learn, or that only certain people have anything to teach us.

In the meantime, let us take the time to share our stories. Let us tell our children what we have discovered and what is possible. Let us remind our children that change is not an enemy and that our humanity need not bear the brunt of it. Let us encourage our children and ourselves that things come in waves and cycles and change is always present, though often unrecognized. Accepting change has been rough during every era----as it is now in our time. The industrial revolution certainly brought change, ---but remember that the sweatshops brought work that turned out to be brutal for many. Today we are facing a depth of poverty and hunger that many world-wide have long had to endure. We are facing the scourge of easy access to automatic firearms, and we are discovering that contrary to the depiction of mental illness in the movies, we cannot always look at someone and know that they are ill. *The more things change, the more they remain the same--*so said another philosopher. I suspect that we pay better attention when we or our loved ones are affected by any change.

Changing the things we can is and will be a difficult task, but that is the challenge. Holding on to joy is essential. Soldiers who must undergo the remaking of their minds, bodies and spirits demonstrate a powerful reality: somewhere deep within resides a determinative courage. Looking on, we stand in awe. That is why surrounding ourselves with positive people is always an asset. Adapting a “yes I can” attitude, an “I will survive” response, is a great and worthwhile reaction to inevitable change. Oh what a life! What a life, indeed.

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