

BUF Sermon Dec 28<sup>th</sup> 2014

***Waking Up in the New Year: Reflections on Transitions*** – Jeff Packer

Good morning, and Welcome. I have to admit, I had some anxiety leading up to being up here today. What can I possibly say that will be meaningful to others? As I began a leadership class in October, the instructor had us write a message on a card to ourselves – things that were important for us to remember as we began this journey. The cards were placed in envelopes addressed to ourselves, to be sent to us at the end of the semester. As I was preparing this sermon - in a moment of strong self-doubt – a received a card in the mail. In it was the following list, signed by myself:

- You do not have to be all things to all people.
- Give what you have to give.
- Do not worry about the outcome.
- Sometimes conflict or struggle is good – a catalyst for change.
- Speak what is in your heart and be true to who you are.
- The rest is not in your hands.

So now... after having given myself, and all of you, this little pep-talk... I can begin.

Most of you know, I attend school at Vancouver School of Theology as a step towards my goal of working in spiritual care and counseling. This past semester, we were studying generational traits and characteristics. The silent generation, the baby boomers, gen x'ers, and millennials... each generation is loosely divided in increments of about 20 years. Characteristics and traits differ and are formed, in part by the social time period in which they grew up... and also in part by what appears as reactions to the previous generation (our parents). Life always seems to seek a balance. One of the things that caught my attention was that the millennials (people now in their 20s and early 30s) are less inclined to categorize people by race, culture, gender, age, sexual orientation, etc. They tend to view people as equals, regardless of these differences or distinctions. They're not as interested in labeling people and don't see it as that helpful.

I found this interesting. So I shared this in class. A millennial in the class took exception to my comments saying: "I don't like you putting me in that box!" I don't think he actually saw the parallel.

But if we look around... we seem to love labels, categories, distinctions! It lets us know where we stand in relation to others... Right!?!? So here's my question... Are you a morning person? One could argue that there are only two basic types of people in the world: morning people... and those who self-identify as... and I quote: "I am **not** a morning person." I always wonder... are they late morning people? afternoon people? evening people? Or maybe, night owls! I have heard of those. Well now I've put myself in a box. Yep! I'm a morning person! Except when I don't feel like it. And I want to warn you... there can be friction between morning people and not-morning people when they happen to meet in the morning. One teenager I knew would not talk to anyone for 2 hours after having to get up in the morning. And if anyone was happy or cheerful in the morning – she would glare at you with a frightening scowl.

The point is... even basic transitions such as waking up in the morning can be difficult. I remember a parent describing the challenge of getting a young child to take a bath, only to discover a similar challenge trying to get them to get out. Or teenagers who don't want to go to bed at night, only to find that the opposite is true in the morning. Transitions are often needed, sometimes unwanted and can be a challenge. I'm sure we can all see parallels in our own lives. How do you resist transitions or change, even when they are needed? – **pause** - I remember reading that "anything in existence wants to remain in existence." Forms that life takes seem to want to continue in that form. A kind of survival instinct... whether it's a physical life, a state of being dry, or awake, or asleep... or even collective human institutions, corporations, religions. Each in its own way, wants to continue in its present form – and tends to resist transformation or change.

Parents and teachers often know the importance of building in smooth transitions with children. As adults, I have seen that some of us deal with change more gracefully than others. We have all heard the old adages that we are creatures of habit – comfortable with the familiar and known. But isn't there also a danger that habit turns

into complacency or even unhealthy addiction? We hear things like: “history repeats itself” or when we look out at the problems and imbalances in our world we may hear: “it’s just human nature to be self-centered or greedy.” Really!?!? Did life evolve on this planet to destroy itself because humans can no longer recognize that we are universal Life? Ignoring needed change is not always a good option.

Pause:

I recently came across the following quote: “**Life is an interesting mix between hanging on and letting go.**” The question then becomes: “What is worth hanging on to, and what do I need to let go of?” I don’t think anyone can answer these for us, but they are worthy of deeper reflection. Are we hanging on to things out of a sense fear, insecurity or lack? Or out of deep commitment, compassion and love? Letting go can also be extremely difficult. Sometimes we are just not ready – and in some situations may never be ready! And that’s OK. But I have noticed a relationship between a refusal to let go when it’s needed, and the level of suffering one experiences. Letting go is associated with a certain acceptance of situations beyond our control. Some do find this through faith – a way of placing the situation in trust of Life itself or the will of God. Similarly, some find it through spiritual surrender which comes through a deep allowing of the present moment, and a willingness to embrace the mystery of life or the unknown. Working at the hospital I met an Alaskan fisherman who had been diagnosed with stage 4 cancer who simply said: “It is what it is. I have no regrets. I got to spend my time doing what I love in the beautiful natural environment of Alaska.” He was neither spiritual nor religious, but had found an acceptance that freed him of suffering – at least in that moment – **Pause** - “What is worth hanging on to, and what do I need to let go of?” There are no simple answers – especially as we confront situations in life we can’t control, or that seem so unacceptable, like loss, illness or death.

As a chaplain, I have seen a lot of death in recent years. Truly companioning someone in this journey can be a sacred honor that blesses both parties in a bond that is hard to describe. However, not all go through this process gracefully. I learned very quickly that there is no “right way” to cope when it comes to loss or death. Each

person's process is their own. Some do find peace and acceptance of what seems so unacceptable. Some do not.

A woman I met at the Hospice House, I'll call her Gail, was in her early sixties and dying of cancer. She was given a prognosis of a few months to live. She told me how she had struggled with the news of her illness for some time, but had finally come to some acceptance of her fate. She just couldn't live with the struggle of resisting what was happening any longer – she described it as ruining the time she had left. As I listened to her story, she described being an alcoholic in her younger life. She had been sober for about 30 years and involved in AA helping others who struggled with addiction. She was used to taking care of others, but seemed to be developing an awareness of her need to take care of herself. She even had to stand up to a family member who tried to come in and take control of her care.

Gail admitted to me that the hardest thing for her was seeing family and friends who would visit her. She worried about them and their process. She wanted them to be OK and struggled with their reactions to her situation. I empathized with her and could see her need not to have to caretake others. She had amazing courage and a clear vision of how she wanted things to be at the end of her life. I ended up sharing with her my perceptions of people visiting in these situations. I said to her: "In my experience many people are just not comfortable in situations they can't fix or control. They struggle with their feelings and don't have a clear sense of how to be or act in the situation. It's understandable, but yes, I can see how it could make visits hard for both of you." I made a suggestion that she try a mindfulness practice. I said: "next time people come, just continue to be present in the moment with an attitude of 'compassionate curiosity.' You don't need to change them in any way, or take on whatever it is they are feeling or thinking. Just notice, be interested and curious without needing anything from them." We spent some time in meditation and prayer before I left.

Next time I went in the nurse said: "Gail was hoping you were coming today, she is looking forward to seeing you." I went into the room and she was so excited. She said: "Jeff, I've been trying what you said but I changed it. Instead of 'compassionate

curiosity' I call it 'childlike curiosity.' I'm learning so much and having the best time." She was so full of life the staff at the house described her as being a "light" in their day. She was open, curious, present, and so grateful for everyone who happened to come to see her. Each time I saw her there was always this feeling that I received as much if not more from our visits. She died a couple of months later, and it is not that her journey was always easy or without pain – especially towards the end. But she did have an experience of seeming to break through the unhappiness of her story, and connect with life in the present that brought her a sense of joy, gratitude and peace.

When it comes to dealing with life and death, and the unavoidable transitions that come with it all, we must choose for ourselves the whys, whats and hows of hanging on and letting go. I have certainly seen transitions of death that were much more difficult than Gail's – both for the patient and family. And, I'm not sure anyone is ever quite prepared. How could you be? But there is something about acknowledging the whole of life – both its pleasures and pains, gain and loss, birth and death – that somehow makes us more whole inside and deepens us as a human being. Grief itself reflects a heart that loves. Each and every time we open our hearts in love, we take the risk of getting them broken. Too often, human beings spend their energy seeking pleasure and avoiding pain – caught in a vicious circle of between our desires and our fears that leads nowhere. It is a spiritual message that says: Stop! And acknowledge what is always, already present. One of my favorite lines in the Gospel of Thomas is when Jesus says: "The father's kingdom is spread out over all the earth, and people do not see it." To me, it's a call to wake up to what is right in front of us.

When I thought about a topic for today's talk. I wondered what it would take for humanity to wake up. When we look at the grave imbalances being created in the world by humans, one has to wonder... what are we missing? Thomas Berry writes: "The natural world is the larger sacred community to which we all belong. To be alienated from this community is to become destitute in all that makes us human. To damage this community is to diminish our own existence." There are many voices today that speak of the need for a new consciousness, a new awareness, or a change of heart – one that radically transforms our relationships on all levels. I tend to see this as part of the

ongoing evolution of life and consciousness. It is described by some as a universal spiritual consciousness that is emerging within, across and outside of religious traditions and within the major disciplines of study from education, to leadership models, to the sciences of human functioning.

While preparing for this sermon, I typed in to google the words: “waking up.” The first thing that popped up was a new book by Sam Harris, scientist, skeptic and author of bestselling book: *The End of Faith*. Harris has been an outspoken critic of fundamentalist religion... even religion in general. I don't always share his views because fundamentalism occurs in many contexts – not just religions. Some fundamentalist atheists are very upset with Harris whose new book is titled: *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion*. A search on the Bellingham Public Library website revealed 5 copies in the county. All were checked out with a waiting list of 27 people – so I bought a copy. Harris writes: “A rational approach to spirituality seems to be what is missing from secularism and from the lives of most people I meet... The landscape of human experience includes deeply transformative insights about the nature of one's own consciousness... and we no longer face a practical impediment to investigating spiritual insights in the context of science.” He argues that how we pay attention to the present moment largely determines the quality of our lives and our connection to others.

It has been my goal to have this kind of conversation at BUF. Spiritual life or mystical experiences really have nothing to do with wishful or magical thinking, or what some may think of as new age spiritual consumerism. It is a process of waking up and being more present to life. It is about recognizing the value and reclaiming the power of our conscious attention. Many things in life pull our attention in million different ways – even our own thoughts. It is so easy to be lost in the busyness of compulsive living, susceptible to the conditioning of a consumeristic and media driven culture. But what we give our attention to we give our life to. Sometimes, we don't realize this until we are standing at the bedside of a loved one as they take their last breaths.

Gandhi said: We must be the change we wish to see in the world.” Old ways of doing things can have such momentum. May we support each other in all the ways we

need to hang on, or let go. May we take moments in our busy days to stop, notice, and pay closer attention to life, to each other, and to our planet.

Pause

I want to end with a short reading and meditation. This is from the book *Paradise in Plain Sight: Lessons from a Zen Garden* by Karen Miller. I will read, we will have a short silent time before I ring the bell. Then Shasta will play a song for our collection. Feel free to close your eyes if you like.

In the Garden:

“Then I saw a garden. I saw a multitude of iridescent greens. The glint of sun-bleached stones. Red bark and burnished branches. The sheen on still water. Light on a hill. A foreground, a background: the seamless whole in three dimensions. Colors with no names because I wasn’t naming them. Beauty beyond measure because I wasn’t measuring it. A view unspoiled because I wasn’t judging it. The shine of the sky making everything vivid, even the shadows, with the radiance of being alive... When you see, really see, you just love. When you love, really love, you just see. You see things as they are, not as you expect... and in that wide-open space is love. This is the kind of love that everyone wants, the kind that everyone needs... Unconditioned by definitions or demands... judgment or hesitation... You are in the Garden.”

To read between songs:

Rumi: The Dream that Must be Interpreted:

*Humankind is being led along an evolving course,  
Through this migration of intelligences,  
And though we seem to be sleeping,  
There is an inner wakefulness  
That directs the dream,  
And that will eventually startle us back  
To the truth of who we are.*