

THE UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP OF PETERBOROUGH
THE REV. JULIE STONEBERG
BE THE CHANGE
APRIL 10, 2016

OPENING WORDS *from Gestalt at Sixty* ~ May Sarton

Lovers and friends,
I come to you starved
For all you have to give,
Nourished by the food of solitude,
A good instrument for all you have to tell me,
For all I have to tell you.
We talk of first and last things,
Listen to music together,
Climb the long hill to the cemetery
In autumn,
Take another road in spring
Toward newborn lambs.
No one comes to this house
Who is not changed.
I meet no one here who does not change me.

Come. Let us be moved together toward the change that we wish to see in the world.

STORY FOR ALL *The Gardener* ~ Sarah Stewart

(Through her letters, we hear the story of a young girl who moves to the city to work in her uncle's bakery during the 1930's and brings beauty to that experience by creating a rooftop garden.)

READING *Renew Your Spirit* ~ Peter Morales

This essay appeared in this past winter's edition of the UUWorld magazine. It was written by the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Rev. Peter Morales:

We Unitarian Universalists claim to have a lot of theological diversity. Yet every UU I have ever known, whether that person is a humanist, theist, pagan, Christian, or Buddhist—or refuses all labels—shares a core conviction. We all believe that things do not have to be the way they are. We refuse to accept that inequality, hatred, environmental destruction, racism, and war are inevitable parts of the human condition. We believe that we can make things better, especially when we act together. Historically, many religions have taught the opposite. They have taught that we are to accept our lot in life, that we deserve to suffer, and that things are the way they are because of predestination, original sin, karma, or some such. Religions have taught that the earthly powers that shape our world have divine sanction. They have taught that

kings and queens have their power by divine right, or that the emperor or chief is a god. Why, then, are we UU's convinced that things need not be the way they are? We believe it because we have experienced life's possibilities. We have experienced love, beauty, joy, friendship, and a peace that transcends our understanding. ...

We need to remember. When we witness brutality, injustice, the stupidity of our politics, heartless human exploitation by the economically powerful, and the wanton devastation of nature – when we find ourselves becoming bitter, we need to remind ourselves of our most treasured experiences.

Actually, we need to do more than remember. We need to experience life's gifts and possibilities once more. Renewing contact with what is most precious in life is really a spiritual practice. It is an essential practice. If we do not feed our spirits, they will wither. Even the good deeds we strive to do will become acts of anger and joyless obligation rather than efforts to share and to heal.

We all need to ask ourselves, "What does my spirit need right now?" Perhaps it is quiet time in nature. Maybe a visit to a new exhibition in a museum. How about some time in the garden? Why not attend a concert by a favorite artist, or take a walk with an old friend? The possibilities go on and on.

Even better, how about creating something rather than being passive? Play some music. Sing in a chorus. Paint or sculpt again. Knit or quilt or sew. ... Cook up something new and special. Play with a child. Now and then we all need to visit the world we are trying to create.

There is a part of me that feels guilty and self-indulgent when I do things that I enjoy and that feed my spirit. There are always articles or sermons to write, people to call, meetings to attend, emails to answer, projects to move forward. Yet deep down, I know better. Just as practices such as prayer and meditation give us clarity and strength to re-engage with the world, so too do other practices that get us in touch with what is most precious.

I urge you – yes, you – to make some space to reflect on what your spirit needs right now. Deep down you know; we all do. Our deepest longings will guide us. Make space for beauty and love and play. Let your spirit heal and soar.

When our spirits are strong and reconnected, our work for compassion and justice has enduring power. When our spirits are renewed, we are blessings to one another and to the world.

MESSAGE

Be the Change

~ Rev. Stoneberg

I'm taking a bit of a personal risk today, and talking about my health. But, I want to assure you up front that I am not ill, or even more than mildly unhealthy. Please don't worry that I'm hiding something or in need of some special attention. I'm simply choosing to use the way I

interfaced with healthcare services as an example. Everybody okay with that?

Here goes.

Yesterday I had an appointment with a new health services provider, which is always a bit stressful for me. For most of my life, I've treated my health from a state of denial...not going to a doctor unless REALLY necessary, never fully sharing my 'problems', especially details, rarely asking questions, and generally harbouring deep-seated shame, really about anything body-related. (That's a whole other topic, and we're not going there today.) Consequently, I've usually felt that I wasn't heard or noticed (because I wasn't speaking up) and this over time snowballed to where I felt that my health didn't matter...to others, or even to myself.

Recently, however, I decided I needed to change this. Recognizing that no health professional was going to intuit how I was feeling and then magically know how to fix me, I've challenged myself to begin asking for what I need and to share the whole story. I'm working on this, and committed to it, even though so far, this has only served to increase my anxiety. I trust it's going to get better.

So...back to yesterday. As I said, I went to see someone for the first time. I was anxious. She was showing me around the offices, graciously trying to make me feel at ease in the space...a space that feels recently remodeled. The décor is simple and white... very fresh...clean...even sparse...nothing on the walls in the way of art. Except...except...as we walked back down the hall toward the treatment room, there in a little niche hung a simple black and white canvas. "Be the change you wish to see in the world."

Weird, eh? Obviously I'd yet to prepare this message, and I was both anxious about this appointment and concerned about having enough time left in the day to work on what I was going to say here. Then, there, like a gentle messenger, hung the words I needed to hear...the words I am going to share with you..."Be the change you wish to see in the world." In that moment I was able to smile at the serendipity of it, take a deep breath, and then remind myself to be as forthright and trusting as possible with this caregiver.

Clearly, that little sign reminded me to be the change I was hoping for in myself. But for the world? Well, I hadn't really thought of it that way, but I don't think it's too much of a stretch to say that what I want for myself are also a changes I wish to see in the world. I would love for this world to be a place where everyone has access to excellent, compassionate, and affordable health care. I want this to be world where, no matter the size or shape or condition of one's body, that the person in that body, as well as their caregivers, would treat it with respect and care. My wish for the world is that no one would feel shame about their body, and that all beings would know that they matter. The small changes I'm trying to make in myself are indeed expressions of these wishes I have for the world.

In the advertised 'blurb' about this service, I posed this question. If you believe that the first thing that we need to change is ourselves, how is it that the world then becomes that change?

Just because I have a more forthright conversation with a healthcare provider on a Saturday afternoon in Peterborough, can I expect that soon all bodies in the world will be cared for with compassion? Seems like a long shot. But do these two things have any kind of a cause and effect relationship, however small? If I truly believe that all of existence is an interconnected web, how could what I do have no effect?

Ghandi, after all, didn't say be the change you want to see, and the world will change. He simply said BE the change you wish to see.

Actually, he didn't say that, at least not according to an article in the NYTimes.¹ Apparently, the closest verifiable words to this famous quote that were actually spoken by Ghandi are these: "If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change toward him. ... We need not wait to see what others do."

In any case, we all know that Ghandi was an agent for great change in his nation and in the world. And while the stories about him exhibit a man who had indeed cultivated peace within himself, he didn't then just sit still, and assume that working on himself was enough. We can see this in his actions as well as in other things he is quoted as saying, like "No one can hurt me without my permission" which is about how important our own attitude and reactions are. And, "An eye for an eye only makes the whole world blind," showing that forgiveness is part of the change equation. And, "an ounce of practice is worth more than tons of preaching" which demonstrates that he believed in doing. And he said a lot more. But I think you get the point. It's not so simple as just changing ourselves and then resting on our laurels.

Still, I happen to believe that when we change ourselves we do change the world. It may not be immediately obvious; in fact it seldom is. It may not lead to dramatic or sudden change; as only in rare instances is that true. We may not see it in our lifetime. Still. The message is, start with changing yourself.

I know. No small task.

On Thursday I was at a gathering of the UU Ministers in Southern Ontario. We watched together a webcast in which I found some great 'self-change' advice and I want to share it with you. (By the way, the webinar was awesome, and is actually about congregational relevance. You're invited to join our Board here in watching that same webinar on Thursday the 21st at 7:15pm.) Anyway, what I found so relevant for this morning was a bit of wisdom from Peter Block's book "The Answer to How is Yes." He wrote that nothing changes until you say yes, and that saying yes is defined as believing in what you are doing. Isn't that a just an alternative way to say "Be the change you wish to see in the world?" In other words, if you believe in something, if you have a vision for a change in the world, say yes to it. By saying yes to it, you're affirming it and bringing it into your own life and being.

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/30/opinion/falser-words-were-never-spoken.html?_r=0

Block goes on say that one of main reasons we don't say yes...even when we have a vision for change...is that we are usually asking the wrong question. We tend to ask HOW before we say yes, before we commit ourselves to anything. 'How' questions, Block says, keep us focused on what is practical and doable, and actually get in the way of us following our hearts into uncharted territory. We ask how something is done, that that only serves to postpone the actual doing. We ask how much it will cost rather than asking ourselves what price we are willing to pay. We ask how long it will take, rather than asking ourselves about the commitment we're willing to make.

In other words, 'how' questions lead us to look outside of ourselves for help and examples of success, and stop us from being the change ourselves. We turn outward rather than inward, hoping that change will start somewhere else, with someone else.

Our culture puts the focus on getting things done, and maybe that's why we hesitate to simply be the change, because we can't imagine how, or how long, or how much it will cost, before that change will be evidenced in the world beyond us. We want to see the results. We want to measure the effect we have, before we do anything.

So, if there is something you believe in, if it's something you believe that you and the world need, practice saying yes to it before asking how. Commit yourself to it first. Say yes, and be that change.

When I was in seminary, I went on a study trip to Israel and Palestine. We met with organizations and individuals who were trying to build bridges of understanding across those borders, to bring down walls, to create peace. Big world change. One of those organizations was the YMCA in Bethlehem², which sees as part of its mission, a need to contribute to the reconstruction of Palestinian society, which has faced decades of systemic destruction, dispersal of its peoples, and violations of its human rights. While, yes, like other YMCAs around the world, they are a community and sports centre, that's secondary to their focus on rehabilitation of children and youth who have been injured in and traumatized by the ongoing violence. The scope of their work is overwhelming.

As I listened to their stories, I too became overwhelmed, and I asked how it is, in the face of all that they have seen, that they are able to go on. The director had a simple answer...when your back is against the wall, he said, and you have only the choice to work for life or succumb to death, the answer is easy. One must work for life.

While thankfully, few of us are ever in exactly that position, I think his answer is also an answer for us. Say yes to life. Say yes to those things you can affect and control. Change yourself in the direction in which you want to see the future go. Be that change. Don't worry if it will be enough. Don't fuss about how successful it looks. Saying yes may be all that you can do, and you may never see the results, but it is better than...it will ALWAYS be better

² <http://www.ej-ymca.org/>

than...choosing not to make the contribution that only you can make...which is to be the best you that you can be.

And you know, you never do know what change you catalyze. I wonder, thinking back on my small decision to change how I interact with my health care, how that change came about in me. It didn't just come out of the blue. Of course, some of it comes from my own experience and my increasing frustration. But I know that I have also been changed by you...by affirming messages that you have given me. I know I have been changed by the times when you've been brave enough to share your own struggles with health and shame. I know that I have been changed by hearing your visions for a world in which each person is honoured, both in spirit AND body. Who you are has changed me. And in turn, in some small way, who I am has changed you. And those who have been changed by us have certainly affected change in others.

I could continue to put the onus on the health practitioner. They aren't paying attention or are hurrying through the appt. They don't understand what it's like to be me. They blame me for my problems. They aren't sensitive enough. I could do that.

I could, as I have, go on thinking that I deserve the shame I feel around my health. That it's my fault and no one really wants to be my health care provider. I could remain in my silence and just put up with any indignities I bring on myself in those visits. I could.

But somehow, by some confluence of influences, I began to have a different vision for the world of my personal health care. And the only place I could start was with myself.

This brings me back to Ghandi who said that "Constant development is the law of life." Peter Block put a slightly different spin on this, saying that nothing changes in any system without someone talking about it, and that change happens at the speed of relationship. Isn't that why we gather here, in community? Knowing that we are perfect but also in need of improvement, open to the possibility of change and growth, meeting and conversing with one another in order to express our dreams and visions for the world? And as the quality and depth of our conversations improve, our relationships grow deeper, and each of us becomes more open to growing, and changing.

Thank you for the many ways in which who you are continues to affect and change me. The world would be so much less without your presence and your voice. May each of us be the change that we wish to see in the world, and may we also, every so once in a while, see that change reflected in the world around us.

So be it.

READING

The Lily in the Window ~Thomas Rhodes

A little story to wrap up our time together.

Once upon a time there was an old man who lived alone with his grandson in a dirty hovel. Everything around them was filthy (you can imagine!)

One day a stranger appeared and gave the young child a beautiful lily. The boy took it home and placed it on a windowsill in his house. The grandfather saw the flower and put it in a jar of water. His grandson realized how dirty the window was in contrast to the lily and cleaned it. The grandfather then replaced the jar with a vase, and swept the floor. Over time the boy and grandfather clean up their home, even planting flowers out front. Neighbors stop by to admire them, and they (get to know one another and) become integrated into the community.

Eventually the lily dies, but by this time the house is clean and orderly, the boy has friends, and the grandfather is calling on a lady neighbor.

Their world has changed.

***CLOSING WORDS** *Into The World Singing* ~ Dawn Skjei Cooley

Let us go out into the world singing.

Let us go out into the world singing songs that proclaim liberty.

Songs that turn ashes into garlands

Songs that bind up the afflicted and those who mourn.

Songs that, like oaks, have roots that go deep and stand strong.

Let us go out into the world singing.

We know these songs. They vibrate through time, in our very souls.

They are the songs that give us life.

They are the songs that give us meaning.

They are the songs that give us purpose.

Now it is our turn, to take these life-giving songs out into the world.

Let us go now – singing these songs with voices deep and strong.

And may the world join us in praise and in celebration and in love.

Amen.