

THOUGHTS TO PONDER Unitarian Universalist service 7/26/09

“It is not enough to understand, or to see clearly.
The future will be shaped in the arena of human activity,
by those willing to commit their minds and their bodies to the task.”

“There are those who look at things the way they are,
and ask WHY....
I dream of things that never were,
and ask WHY NOT?”

Robert F. Kennedy

HOW DO OUR BELIEFS CHALLENGE CHANGE?

Does Change challenge our Beliefs?

Good morning. I'd like to start by thanking you for inviting me back again. It's really an honor to be asked to share a message with this congregation and further to be told it's OK to sing too. When my wife Priscilla and I moved here from New York in the early 1980's, we attended services here regularly for quite some time. I'm going to touch on BELIEF this morning – and I'm going to share some thoughts about CHANGE.

Our son Colin was dedicated here – right outside under the tree that had just been planted. That tree has changed some since his dedication ceremony. So has Colin. Our other son Dorian was about five years old when we started coming here, and in keeping with Rev, Kellaway's efforts to reach out to different populations of the church community, Dorian (along with the other school-age members of the congregation) would sometimes light the chalice at the start of the service. We figured it would be cool for him to start today off the same way. He wanted to know if it still goes “pop” when it catches fire. I think Kellaway used to soak cotton balls in gun powder or something – it was kind of dramatic. But I notice the chalice has changed some since then. Of course, so has Dorian. Change happens. Both of our sons developed their earliest spiritual beliefs here. Right here. I'm sure they've developed further since then – but that's what this is about: Change and Belief.

2.

Society, life experiences, careers, tragedy and triumph, and just good old fashioned maturity dictate change constantly. The only thing that's truly constant about change in fact is change itself. Good things come of this: VW Buses and cordless tools come to mind. Sometimes change results in mistakes. Disco and Baco-Naise.

But let me move on to the point using some simple illustrations.

In Fourteen Hundred and Ninety Two when Columbus sailed the ocean blue, he defied the popular belief of the day that the Earth was a colossal pancake. His heroic voyages to the New World can be described as life-changing experiences. Perhaps if Jimmy Buffett had been around back then, there would be a much earlier version of "Changes in Latitude, Changes in Attitude". Change challenges Belief. Returning to Spain, Columbus did NOT proclaim "Hey, we almost fell off the edge." More likely, he addressed the press conference with "Hey, Isabel! Hey, Fernando! The world – she's a' Round!" [*the urban myth – spherical Earth ancient Greek science – Eratosthenes measured diameter with good precision 2nd Cent. BC – Columbus time scholars/navigationers used Astrolabe for measurement & navigation..works on principle of curve or sphere*] So in all likelihood, all he really probably said was "Holy stromboli – these a' ships – they so TINY!" Those who once believed in the Great Pancake had to start thinking of the Great Beach Ball.

When Nicolaus Copernicus wrote in 1543 that the Sun, not the Earth, was probably the center of our Solar System (which at that time was also pretty much The Universe), he too was proposing a huge change in conventional belief. Those who believed themselves to be the center of it all had to start feeling less narcissistic on the great cosmic dance floor. Change challenges belief.

Picture Society for a second as East-bound traffic on I-4 just before the Disney exits...all driving SUV's full of crabby passengers. Columbus, Copernicus, Galileo, and a very few others are blocking the freeway attempting to convince the masses that The Magic Kingdom is not the only point of interest in the State of Florida.

Perhaps a more immediate and realistic illustration can be expressed by the passage of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution in 1865. The stage was

3.

set then for another huge change in popular beliefs. Those who believed a person of color went home at night to the slave quarters had to start thinking that someday such an individual would have the keys to the White House. Change challenges belief.

Closer to home – and now you’ll have to forgive me for sounding like a commercial – let’s look at Change and Belief in the education community. I’m about to enter my 20th year of employment at Saint Stephen’s School in Bradenton. I want to share with you some of the ways in which Belief has affected Change and how Change has necessitated a re-examination of Beliefs.

An often quoted allegory tells of Rip VanWinkle awakening in modern times after his 100 year sleep. He looks at the world around him and is astounded at the way people dress. He almost can’t understand them when they speak – so many strange sounding words and expressions. He notices with awe how they move from place to place in unfamiliar vehicles, talking into tiny plastic gadgets. And just about the time he starts to wonder if he’s somehow been transported into the future, he stumbles upon a school classroom. There he sees neat rows of desks – a teacher’s desk at the front of the room – a clock on the wall – and another wall with writing on a board. “Nope”, he says, “ Same place, same time. Except the blackboards are white.”

Education can rightfully be criticized for holding out against change. Oh, our beliefs are still fundamentally the same: Prepare students for the world outside and a life ahead...educate their minds to be inquisitive and curious...seek and teach truth: but our methods have sometimes been slow to change.

In 2002, Nintendo (the video game company) spent more than \$140 million on Research and Development. The same year, the U.S. Government spent less than half that amount on Research and Innovation in Education.

Now fortunately, this is a ‘good news’ talk this morning. More of a ‘good news’ than a ‘bad news’ talk, I think.

4.

The Internet and related innovations have had an astounding, almost incomprehensible effect on education. And this will have a direct effect on what young people do after they graduate. Today's High School graduates can expect to have between 10 and 14 different jobs by their 38th birthday.

Former Secretary of Education, Richard Riley, has predicted that the Top 10 In-Demand jobs in the calendar year 2010 will not have even existed in 2004. Schools all over the world, not just in the U.S., are currently preparing students for jobs that don't exist yet; jobs using technologies that haven't been invented yet, in order to solve problems we don't even know are problems yet.

And how are we doing? Well, here's where we might want to take a closer look at the Rip VanWinkle story. Because in many American schools, we're still a little too wed to chalk on a blackboard.

Consider these facts: 1) One weeks' worth of The New York Times contains more information than someone in the 18th Century would learn in a life time. 2) There are currently about 540,000 words in the English language. That's about 5 times as many as during Shakespeare's time. 3) Do you know what country is the #1 English speaking country in the world? - China.

So three years ago, the cover story in Time magazine's December issue was "How To Build A Student For The 21st Century". The Head Of School where I work, Mrs. Jan Pullen, called a think-tank together to review the article and come up with a plan to meet the needs of 21st Century students in a manner somewhat more relevant than would be used in the 20th Century. Here's what we came up with.

In addition to Readin', Writin', and 'Rithmetic, schools should focus on
[Chart]

- 1) Financial sustainability
- 2) Environmental responsibility
- 3) Global awareness and relevance
- 4) Programmatic/curricular foresight, and
- 5) Demographic accessibility

We have put these goals together under a strategic program we call The Atlas Initiative. I am the Coordinator of this program.

5.

It would take much more time than I'm allowed this morning to tell you what we are doing in the classrooms to address each of the five components of The Atlas Initiative. I'll give you a brief example of one of them: Number 3 – "Global Awareness and Relevance".

We have established a close link between two other schools – one in the Iringa Province of Tanzania, Africa and one in Guilin, China.

We use a Skype set up to share lessons with these schools. A laptop computer, a small camera with built-in microphone, and a power-point projection system is in place at these three schools. On Tuesday mornings, our Middle School 7th and 8th Graders will talk, solve math problems, exchange thoughts on "To Kill A Mockingbird", and learn Mandarin phrases from the teachers and students at the Guilin Dezhi Foreign Languages School in Guilin, China. On Thursday mornings, other Saint Stephen's students and teachers will share art lessons, dissect fetal pigs, exchange poetry, and learn Swahili phrases from students and teachers at the Lugalo Secondary School in Tanzania, Africa.

This component in itself is pretty amazing – and I've seen people cry at the end of a lesson. The tears are prompted by joy and wonder – not because of academic frustration.

Taking Global Awareness a step or two farther, we also teach Mandarin classes at our school now. And we've hosted students and teachers from the Chinese school for two years now, and have sent students and teachers (myself included) to this school in China. Our Head of School, Mrs. Pullen, and one of our Intermediate School teachers have just returned from the school in Africa.

No purpose is served in the world of Education by strictly adhering to old methodology. Minds – both of students and those who would educate students – should be open, not closed.

If we live in troubled times, it is God's house that is in disarray. And whether God's children are Christian, or Jew, or Muslim, or Hindu, or Buddhist, (or U.U.'s – all of the above), it is the duty of His children to set the house in order. Therefore, our BELIEFS must be expanded. After we

6.

talk to Qian Zhang on Tuesday morning, or laugh at Zephania Kapwani's latest joke on Thursday morning, our expanded BELIEFS must challenge us to CHANGE our perceptions of the world. We need to see China and Africa as not halfway around the world, but as less than half a world away. We need to see language – as spoken in our country – not as one native language, but rather as languages spoken by our natives. We can no longer see our communities as populations based on culture, but rather as a culture based on its' populations.

We must think globally and act locally.

In coordinating this Atlas Initiative program at Saint Stephen's, I have encouraged all the various participants to welcome the historic contributions of the profound thinkers, moralists, philosophers, social reformers, and – yes – the musicians and fashion designers and playwrights and artists who have, in their own way, shaped the current status of Earth's cultural climate. But the challenge has also been given to EDUCATE, not just GRADUATE our students.

This evolution is not always easy. Many teachers in today's marketplace are satisfied to structure their classroom policies so as to reward the student who best answers their questions. We need to see more value now in those students who would question our answers.

We don't live in a small spot on a flat Earth anymore.

And one hopes that little trees, like the one outside your sanctuary, will continue to grow and change for a long time. Nelson Henderson says, "The true meaning of life is to plant trees under whose shade you do not expect to sit."

And if Rip VanWinkle wanted to make one prediction with all certainty about the next 100 years, it would be that CHANGE will continue to challenge us. BELIEVE it!

Preston Boyd

July, 2009

Factoids on pages 3 and 4 from "Shift Happens" YouTube video

