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Embracing Change

Because I am a Unitarian Universalist, when it comes to things we can't see, hear, taste, touch, or feel – things we can't know for sure – I'm sparing with the words "I believe." But long ago, I realized that our spiritual lives will be far richer if we *act as if* certain things are true.

For example, consider the belief that we're here on earth to fulfill some divine mission and that, when we've done our part, we're released. We don't know that, so I can't say I *believe* it. But I choose to act as if it's true, because to live our lives as if we're on a divine mission makes our lives better and changes for the good the lives our lives touch.

Joel Olsteen is the minister of Lakewood Church in Texas, the largest congregation in the United States. Sunday attendance is 43,500. Years ago, Lakewood spent months trying to find a place for a new sanctuary. Finally, they found just what they wanted: a 100-acre tract of land. But on the day they were to close the deal, it was sold out from under them.

A few months later, they found another piece of property. They couldn't believe their luck! But as they neared the day of the sale, the owner changed his mind and refused to sell it to them.

And then, suddenly, the Compaq Center, a sixteen thousand-seat sports arena, located in the bustling heart of downtown Houston, came up for sale. It was perfect. And Rev. Olsteen and his congregation believed they finally understood why they had failed in securing two previous properties they had tried to buy. "... [It] became clear why G*d had closed the other doors," writes Joel Olsteen. "Had we purchased either of those properties, those choices might have kept us from G*d's best."¹

¹ Joel Olsteen, *Become a Better You*, p. 17

Do I *believe* that? I don't. I believe in a god, but not in an invisible puppeteer. But do I agree that that is absolutely the best way to work with disappointment: to give meaning to a possibly random, meaningless saga; and to hold out hope for something better? I do.

We can choose to act as if there's a reason – even though we can't really know what it is – a reason for everything that happens. We can choose to act as if one door closing signals the opening of another. We can choose to live as if it matters that we suffer, surrender, survive, and, by and by, rejoice.

Have you ever been in a building with security that's managed by a series of doors? You enter through one set, then have to wait while they close behind you before the next set opens ... and then those close, and the next doors open. It's a little disconcerting, but it's also a good metaphor for life, and especially, for change. Rev. Olsteen writes, “[We] have to let go of [our] disappointments, let go of [our] failures, and let those doors totally close behind [us]....”²

“You may feel that life has knocked you down,” he says. “...[Whatever] you do, don't stay down. Get back up again, dust yourself off, ... [and if] you can't find anybody to encourage you, ... encourage yourself.”³ “You cannot change the past, but you can do something about the future...[The future] will commence the moment [we stop] looking back, ... [stop] grieving over what [we've] lost.... [and] step forward...”⁴

This is how we pass willingly – willfully, even – through those doors: by allowing them to close behind us, and facing new doors. This is how we equip ourselves for change.

Recently, I had reason to revisit Genesis, the first book in the Bible, and to look with new eyes at chapter three – the chapter in which Eve is tempted by the serpent to eat the apple, and shares it with Adam. You'll remember that G*d comes around looking for them. They're hiding, they say, because they're naked. G*d gets mad, because they've disobeyed him, and it all goes seriously downhill from there.

² Olsteen, *op cit*, p. 19

³ Olsteen, *op cit*, p. 21

⁴ Olsteen, *op cit*, p. 19

But what caught my attention were the first words out of G*d's mouth: "Who told you that you're naked?" In other words, "Who told you there's something wrong with you? You've been talking to the enemy, haven't you?"⁵

This is the biggest obstacle between here and what we want, where we want to go, whom we want to be: the crazy idea that something's fundamentally wrong with us. The first principle of Unitarian Universalism affirms our inherent worth and dignity – everyone's inherent worth and dignity, not everyone's but yours. The call to a life of the spirit is the call to keep moving forward with the conviction that the past – whatever it is – is past. Wall Street's Henry Haskins wrote, "What lies behind us and what lies before us are small matters compared to what lies within us. And when we bring what is within us out into the world, miracles happen."⁶

Out for what turned out to be a very long walk one day, Kem and I ended up in very long conversation about what it means to choose to age well. Obviously, there are many alternatives. The first thing we got really clear about is that *change* is an absolute given, and it's critical to embrace it. Marketing guru Tom Feltenstein writes, "If you don't like change, you're going to like irrelevance a lot less."

There are so many ways to work with change. Many of us don't respond to change by making changes in ourselves until whatever it is is on fire. But people who have studied change have concluded that lighting a fire underneath someone is nowhere near as effective as lighting a fire *within*. This is a really important insight. So many of us wait for things to go seriously wrong before we make a change. What if we cultivated in ourselves a real passion for change, whether to overhaul, or merely to improve or refine?

To begin, we can take on our beliefs. Management consultant Peter Drucker said, "It's easier for companies to come up with new ideas than to let go of old ones." It's true for people, too. So if our old ideas about ourselves – about anything, really – are in the way of transformation, letting go of them is a good place to start.

⁵ Olsteen, *op cit*, p. 9

⁶ Henry Stanley Haskins, *Meditations in Wall Street* (William Morrow & Co., 1940)

Remember the Little Engine That Could? An early version of this beloved children’s story says, “One morning, ... a long train of freight cars asked a large engine ... to take it over the hill. ‘I can’t; that is too much a pull for me,’ said the great engine built for hard work. Then the train asked another engine, and another, only to hear excuses and be refused. In desperation, the train asked the little ... engine to draw it up the grade and down the other side. ‘I think I can,’ puffed the little locomotive, and put itself in front of the great, heavy train. As it went on, the little engine kept bravely puffing ... ‘I think I can, I think I can, I think I can.’”⁷ The Little Engine That Could is a hero.

There’s just one thing that needs to be tweaked about that story, and it has to do with the sense that that little engine is moving very slowly and laboriously uphill. This is counter-intuitive, but it may be the most important spiritual discipline when we make a commitment to embrace change:

When the question is
How fast do we move to make changes?
The answer is
As fast as possible.

In his book *The Heart of Change*, John Kotler tells the story of a guy called Ron Marshall buying his first house – a sixty-five year old fixer-upper. At the closing, the realtor said, “Ron, you have to ... make a list ... immediately ... of all the things you want done, and do [them] in the first six months.” Ron responded, “I’m broke now, but I’m a disciplined guy, and I’ll get everything fixed over the next few years.” [And] she said, “No, you won’t, because after six months you’ll get used to it. You’ll get used to stepping [around the elephant] in the living room.”

Ron Marshall concludes, “I was wrong ... [and] she was right.... When I sold [that house] five years later ... nothing more had been done. The [elephant] was still there!”⁸

I can argue against the directive to make change as fast as possible along with the best of them ... but we’d all be wrong. I first understood this

⁷ “Watty Piper” (a pen name of Arnold Munk, who owned the publishing firm Platt and Munk), *The Little Engine That Could*, 1930

⁸ As told by John Kotler, *The Heart of Change*

when I read Dr. Martin Luther King Junior's *Why We Can't Wait*, the heart of which is his April 16, 1963 "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Responding to his fellow clergymen's criticism that his work was "unwise and untimely," Dr. King speaks to his conviction that we have a moral responsibility to break unjust laws and to take direct nonviolent action rather than to wait for justice to come through the courts – or not.

"We know through painful experience," he writes, "that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was 'well timed' in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now, I have heard the word 'Wait!' It ... has almost always meant 'Never.'"⁹

The slow approach leaves way too much room for inertia to creep in, and sooner or later, the elephant takes up residence in our lives, stopping us in our tracks. Embracing change with enthusiasm and determination creates early victories, which, in turn, "nourish the faith in ... change; ... [provide] an emotional [and spiritual] lift; ... build momentum; ... and ... keep the cynics at bay."

Comedian and actress Lily Tomlin said, "I always wondered why somebody didn't do something about that. Then I realized I was somebody." Poet June Jordan said, "We are the ones we have been waiting for."¹⁰ Let's be the ones.

Beloved spiritual companions,
 Whether or not we believe it,
 may we choose to act as if we're on a divine mission.
 May we choose to act as if one door closing
 signals the opening of another,
 and step forward.
 Affirming the worth and dignity of every being

⁹ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, April 16, 1963

¹⁰ closing words, "Poem for South African Women," in *Passion* (1980) and from *Directed by Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan* (2005)

May we choose to believe that “What lies behind us and what lies before us
are small matters compared to what lies within us,”¹¹
and bring what is within us
out into the world.

Let us light a fire within.
Let’s not wait!
Let us be the ones we’ve been waiting for.

¹¹ Henry Stanley Haskins, *op cit*