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Graceful Change

When my preaching students ask me where sermon topics come from, one of my answers is that they come from overheard snippets of conversations. This summer, I passed two young men sitting on a wall, speaking in earnest together, and one was saying to the other, “I’m in charge of celebrations.”

I experienced that kind of “I want what he’s having” moment — what a fabulous job description! Well why not? Every one of us could be self-appointed: I’m In Charge of Celebrations.

Very soon after that overheard gem, seemingly out of nowhere — as these things tend to happen — I turned on NPR and heard someone saying, “I’m in charge of celebrations.” I thought, Is this a thing?

It turned out they were referring to a book — a children’s book with that title, written by Byrd Baylor. I made haste to the library. *I’m in Charge of Celebrations* is the story of a child who is quite solitary, though not lonely, who invents holidays and festivities to honor Important Events like the first snow and seeing a coyote. This child says, “You can tell what’s worth a celebration because your heart will POUND....”

They keep a record of every holiday, and over the years build an extraordinary calendar of joy. “Last year,” the child says, “I gave myself one hundred and eight celebrations — besides the ones [when we’re off from school.” “I cannot,” they say, “get by with only a few.”

So many moments over these pandemic years have made my heart pound — sometimes in fear but so often in gratitude. I don’t want to forget what we’ve been through together while apart. Remembering has the power to give us tremendous strength. Celebrating the kindness, generosity, and resilience of this beloved spiritual community is a great strategy for remembering joy. It is also a terrific tool for empowering us to navigate our way through all that is to come, and managing

the anxiety of change. Wait! More change?! Yes, indeed. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, “Change is the only constant.”

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Does it strike you as strange that, given that the very nature of life is change, most of us really Don't Like It and resist it so gracelessly? That resistance so doesn't serve us! Let's talk about four strategies for more graceful change.

First up is **acceptance**. In her extraordinary book, *When Things Fall Apart*, American Tibetan Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön writes,

“To be fully alive,
fully human,
and completely awake
is to be continually thrown out of the nest.”

Pema Chödrön isn't cueing resignation, deep sighs, and all the terrible feelings that reside under the heading, *Here We Go Again*. She invites us to get curious. I kind of love it when Rev. John Gibbons, our Community Minister for Good Trouble, walks into a room and asks of no-one in particular, “What fresh hell is this?” Let's get curious.

A second strategy in facing change is to **listen to your cheering section**. Surround yourself with people who lift you up and, as much as possible, don't engage with those who are going to make a bad thing worse. *Who's your cheering section?* If your boosters are a phone call away, have them on speed dial. Alternatively, don't dial pain.

And uplift yourself! There's that great old parable, attributed to the Cherokee, about a conversation between a grandfather and his grandson. “A terrible fight is raging in each of us,” says the grandfather, “— a fight between two wolves. One wolf is evil: He is despair, meanness, selfishness, and greed. The other wolf is good: He is joy, compassion, kindness, and generosity.”

His grandson asks, “Which wolf will win?”

And the grandfather answers,
“The one you feed.”

Which wolf are we feeding? Fear or courage? Isolation or connection?

A third strategy in facing change is to **Get Quiet**. If we're experiencing a lot of incoming hits, stillness is an excellent regulation strategy. Just stop — even

for a few deep breaths. If you'd like, you can pray or meditate. In Buddhism, there's a lovely practice called "taking refuge." Buddhists take refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and sangha: the teacher, the teachings, and the community of practitioners. Where do you take refuge? Make it portable: a place you can carry inside you. Go there for rest and refreshment.

If, in your stillness, you're still going up against change like you're representing your high school on the debating team, resist resisting! Try sitting with the discomfort of the full catastrophe — and breathe into the possibility of opportunity and spiritual growth.

And finally, a fourth strategy in facing change: **Lean into your routine.** Keep the horizon short, focus on what you can control, and stay light on your feet. This is when the muscles built by our daily spiritual practice are tested; you can say the Serenity Prayer with me:

G*d, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
 Courage to change the things I can,
 And the wisdom to know the difference.

I read an interesting précis of research being done at Harvard Business School: They concluded that going on and on about how awful it all is actually interferes with our natural ability to adapt. In other words, do your best to acknowledge whatever it is that's gotten to you; say hello to your frustration, anxiety, and anger; and remember that pain is inevitable — suffering is optional. Keep updating and editing the story you're telling yourself and others, remembering that all of this — everything — is impermanent. Mind open, heart open, hands open: Keep your eyes on the prize.

Some of you will remember psychiatrist Victor Frankl's memoir, *Man's Search for Meaning* — the German edition is entitled, *Nevertheless, Say Yes to Life*. While imprisoned in Nazi death camps, he observed that the way prisoners imagined their future affected their longevity. Victor Frankl survived the Holocaust only to return home and discover that his entire family had been murdered. His book makes the case for deciding how we will respond to tragedy and change: Our freedom is in deciding how we will respond and what we will do next.

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I want to circle back to Pema Chödrön (there's a wonderful spiritual practice!) and share with you a story I've told before. First, this from her:

“Embarking on the spiritual journey is like getting into a very small boat and setting out on the ocean to search for unknown lands. With wholehearted [spiritual] practice comes inspiration, but sooner or later, we will also encounter fear. For all we know, when we get to the horizon, we are going to drop off the edge of the world.”

She continues, “We cannot be in the present and run our story lines at the same time! Impermanence becomes vivid in the present moment; so do compassion and wonder and courage.”

And here’s the story:

“I once attended a lecture about a man’s spiritual experiences in India in the 1960s,” she writes. “He said he was determined to get rid of his negative emotions. He struggled against anger and lust; he struggled against laziness and pride. But mostly he wanted to get rid of his fear. His meditation teacher kept telling him to stop struggling, but [nothing worked].

“Finally, the teacher sent him off to meditate in a tiny hut in the foothills. He shut the door and settled down to practice, and when it got dark, he lit three small candles. Around midnight, he heard a noise in the corner of the room, and in the darkness he saw a very large snake. It looked to him like a king cobra. It was right in front of him, swaying. All night he stayed totally alert, keeping his eyes on the snake. He was so afraid, ... he couldn’t move. There was just the snake, and himself, and fear.

“Just before dawn, the last candle went out, and he began to cry. He cried not in despair, but from tenderness. He felt the longing of all the [people and animals] in the world; he knew their alienation and their struggle. All his meditation had been nothing but further separation and struggle. He accepted — really, [wholeheartedly accepted] — that he was angry and jealous, that he resisted and struggled, and that he was afraid. He accepted that he was also precious beyond measure — wise and foolish, rich and poor, and totally unfathomable.

“He felt so much gratitude that in the total darkness, he stood up, walked toward the snake, and bowed. Then he fell sound asleep on the floor.

“When he awoke, the snake was gone. He never knew if it was his imagination or if it had really been there, and it didn’t seem to matter. As he put it

at the end of the lecture, that much intimacy with fear caused his dramas to collapse, and the world around him finally got through.”¹

Beloved spiritual companions,

I urge you to put yourself in charge of celebrations,
— feel your heart *pound!* —
so you can remember joy in the face of fear
and be graceful in the face of change.

Practice acceptance,
listen to your cheering section,
and feed the right wolf.

Get quiet,
take refuge,
lean into your routine,
and focus on what you can control.

Say yes to life.
May we, too, feel gratitude in the darkness.

Amen.

¹ Pema Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart*, pp. 1-4