

**Change<sup>1</sup>**  
*Rev. Myke Johnson*  
*January 8, 2012*  
*Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church*

Reading      Excerpts from *Parable of the Talents*      Octavia Butler<sup>2</sup>

*Our readings today are from Parable of the Talents, by Octavia Butler. Her main character, Olamina, created a book within the book, verses of wisdom for her followers during a time of upheaval and crisis in the future of our country.*

1. All that you touch, You change  
All that you Change, Changes you  
The only lasting truth Is Change.  
God Is Change.<sup>3</sup>

2. God is change...  
God is Trickster  
    Teacher  
    Chaos  
    Clay--  
God is Change.  
Beware: God exists to shape and to be shaped.<sup>4</sup>

3. Chaos  
Is God's most dangerous face--  
Amorphous, roiling, hungry.  
Shape Chaos--Shape God.  
Act.  
Alter the speed or the duration of Change.  
Vary the scope of Change  
Recombine the seeds of Change  
Transmute the impact of Change  
Seize Change. Use it.  
Adapt and grow.<sup>5</sup>

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1 Copyright 2012 by Rev. Myke Johnson and Allen Avenue UU Church. Permission must be requested to reprint, other than for personal use.

2 Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Talents*, (Warner Books, 1998). These excerpts are from the writings of the major character, a book within the book, called "Earthseed: The Books of the Living."

3 Butler, p. 3.

4 Butler, p. 48.

5 Butler, p. 22.

4. *God is Change.*  
And hidden within Change  
Is surprise, delight,  
Confusion, pain,  
Discovery, loss,  
Opportunity and growth.  
As always,  
God exists to shape and to be shaped.<sup>6</sup>

#### *Sermon*

Tuesday morning I woke from a dream. In the dream, someone has stolen my backpack—the bag where I carry everything—wallet, checkbook, pens, hairbrush, medicine, journal, and special small objects with sentimental value. I am stunned and shaken.

At some point, I realize that one important spiritual object was not in the bag—that I still have it with me. It is a stone with a hole in it, called a spirit stone, which I often wear on a leather string while I meditate. I feel a moment of relief and put it on. Then I begin to walk down the street looking everywhere for the black bag. I see one that looks like mine, but it's not. There is a great empty feeling inside me.

--Once, I lost my bag for real. I was living in Boston then, and parked my car on the street next to a wooded field where a group was playing a softball game. I locked the car, but foolishly left my bag on the front seat. When I came back, I discovered that someone had broken the window and the bag was gone. It is a great hassle to deal with stolen ID and credit cards and all that — it can take days to make phone calls and stop payment and arrange for new documents.

But the loss I felt the most was that of my personal journal. At first, I felt horrible with the thought that someone might read it. Later, I figured it was more likely that the thief just tossed it into a trash can. I remember that I had an immediate impulse—to write in my journal about the theft—only it wasn't there—and that was the most disorienting of all.--

In my dream, I keep wandering around in a shock of loss and disbelief. How can my bag be gone? It must be somewhere, if only I keep looking. And what is in it? What is gone? Each time I remember a particular item I feel a new sense of loss.

Then, at some point in my wandering, I feel an inner voice speak to me. "Let go," it says. "Stop looking for your bag, just let go. If it is there to be found, you'll see it. But don't keep searching for it. Just let go." And so, in the dream, with a great moment of effort, I let go. Then I feel a feeling like being washed clean. Empty, but in an open way. Empty and new.

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<sup>6</sup> Butler, p. 92.

Change is everywhere. Change is life, and life is change. It may sweep through our lives like a tornado, or come slowly like a trickling stream, but change is inevitable. If we have been happy and content, change can feel like a curse. If we have been miserable and in pain, change can feel like a blessing. Some change comes upon us against our will, like the loss of my bag. Other change comes because we choose it; we work and plan to bring new opportunities into our lives. But change, whether chosen or imposed, can be very difficult.

When we face the difficulty of change, we are tempted to try to keep everything under control. Consultant Gil Rendle says this is just the opposite of what is most helpful.<sup>7</sup> According to Rendle, change is a chaotic process, and we do best if we can embrace that chaos. He says change starts with a place of pain. Something hurts, something is wrong. To bring about change, we need two things: to add possibility, and to take away the box.

To add possibility means to open a door: through hope, through fantasy, through longing, through believing that change is possible. To take away the box means to let go of our old solutions and structures, the ones that aren't working, the ones that may be causing the pain in the first place. We must let go of being in control. If we step out of the box, Rendle says we will enter into chaos, into the wilderness. And this is the critical feature of the process: It is by entering into chaos, that we will be helped to find a creative and faithful choice.

Rendle uses the story of Moses to illustrate the chaotic process of change. Moses led the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt. They escaped from the Egyptians, but then they entered the wilderness of the desert. Right away they started complaining to Moses, saying, "Why did you bring us out here to die? At least in Egypt we had food!" They so wanted things to be under control that they began to look back fondly at the nightmare of their slavery. They had no idea how to be free people. But they continued on. The story tells us that they had to wander in the desert for forty years before they were able to become a free people, and to be led into the promised land.

One of the biggest times of change in my life was the end of a significant relationship. I felt confused and bewildered about what to do next. I kept wanting to call my former partner. I hurt all the time. As in the dream of losing my bag, change had been forced upon me by the actions of another person. I was frantically wishing to bring back what was lost, but it wasn't working. Only by letting go, by entering the chaos of the unknown, could I discover a sense of new possibility.

We may not be used to thinking of chaos in a positive manner. There is a story that comes from the Yoruba tradition about a goddess called Oya. Oya is understood to be the chaotic tornado, who sweeps everything away from the houses of the people as she passes through. But she also sweeps in wealth and riches to the one who can embrace her.

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<sup>7</sup> Gil Rendle is a consultant with the Alban Institute, leading workshops on congregational change. He is the author of *Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders*.

The Yoruba people understand that chaos is sacred, chaos is a holy power. If Oya is honored, rather than feared or run away from, she will bring us good fortune. And truthfully, we can't escape chaos by running away. It storms in anyway. If we embrace the whirlwind, we calm it down and it brings a blessing.

I am thinking about some of the changes we are experiencing now in our church community. One change is that we have a new church administrator, Lesley Jones. For several years, we had been experiencing the pain of too much work for our previous secretary and volunteers to manage. And so we began to think outside the box—to imagine new possibilities. Bringing a new staff person on board is a chaotic process. Lesley has a lot to learn about what goes on here. In the next several weeks, we may find ourselves confused or bewildered at times, and I know she is feeling confused and bewildered. But already the chaos is opening up new opportunities.

One new thing is that Lesley is going to come to church next Sunday in order to meet people and get acquainted with our community. That was not something we ever asked of our church secretary. Her role was much more one of providing support than of offering leadership. But we did not just hire a new person, we decided to embrace a new idea—a staff person who would bring leadership and creativity to caring for our communication, our building management, and our finances. Now we get to see what will emerge! This change may not be on the front page of our church life together, but we hope it will increase our capacity to live our mission.

Change is never easy. Even good change is stressful. Early cultures were very conscious of this, and created powerful rituals around times of important change. A classic example is the coming of age ritual. The transition from childhood to adulthood was recognized as a dangerous one. It was seen as a chaotic time, what anthropologists call "liminal" time, the time between the ending of one thing and the beginning of the next. Liminal time is dangerous, but it is also sacred, a time when magic and mystery can enter the world. Children entering into the chaos of their transition to adulthood were carefully encircled with stories and gifts and love.

One of the most beautiful metaphors for this type of transformation comes to us from the world of nature: the process of the caterpillar becoming a butterfly. A caterpillar hardens a chrysalis around itself, hanging from a branch or plant stem, hiding itself from view. Then, its body literally dissolves into liquid, and reformulates into a new creature, a creature with wings. When it has completed its transformation, it emerges into the world again.

The chrysalis provides a container for something mysterious and chaotic. Rituals, in a similar fashion, are a form of sacred container. When we are going through major transformation, we may feel as if we are dissolving into liquid, and losing all familiarity and function. What we need at this time is not to cling to the old forms, but to enter a sacred enclosure, a container to hold us through the process, so we don't scatter to the winds. Rituals make a sacred circle around us, so we can enter fully into the mysterious process which is beyond our control.

Religion has always had an intimate relationship with change. People turn to religious ritual to mark a new relationship in marriage, to celebrate the birth of a child, or to grieve a loved one who has died. People turn to religious communities during times of transition in their lives. Each week, when we join together in worship, we invite change into our lives. We enter a pregnant space between the way things are and the way we hope they might become. We seek the power to bring positive change to our wider world.

When we can embrace the mystery of chaos, Rendle says we will be helped to find the creative and faithful choice. He believes that we are not alone in our changes. We don't have to be in control, because we can trust in the universe. I am reminded of the early Quaker hymn, "My life flows on in endless song." Despite all the storms of life, the singer is sustained by the truth that love prevails, love is lord of heaven and earth. That belief was echoed by our Universalist forebears: love is the ultimate power which underlies the universe. We can risk entering the chaos, because we will be helped.

Change happens within our personal lives, within our families and communities, and it also happens within our larger society. In thinking about the necessary chaos of change, I am reminded of the Occupy Wall Street movement. It began as a response to the pain of economic inequality: we are living in a time of financial hardship for many, while a small percentage are becoming ever more wealthy. People set up tents in a public park as a way of stepping outside the box—saying that the solutions and structures we now have are not working. It was a way of inviting new possibilities and new hope for a society in which all people might thrive.

From the outside, the media and many others experience it as a chaotic force—unclear in its goals and demands. And the Occupy protesters invite that chaos into their midst—they hold general assemblies in which anyone can speak, and every person present can have a role in decision making. They leave things open for something new to emerge. We don't know yet where it will go. But there is a magic to this moment, when change is possible. Now people across the country who might never dream of camping overnight in a city park are talking about economic issues. We will be having a congregational conversation here at A2U2 on Sunday January 22<sup>nd</sup>. Everyone is invited to participate.

We live in a world with huge troubles right now and a lot of pain. I have talked to many people who are feeling discouraged and even despairing about the future. There are economic troubles for sure. I know that many in our community have lost jobs, and others are feeling insecure about keeping theirs. We have also witnessed environmental catastrophes such as the Fukushima nuclear meltdown, and the ongoing prospect of global warming. A short while ago, an article that someone posted on Facebook caught my attention: "The World is Falling Apart and 5 Reasons Why That's a Good Thing."<sup>8</sup>

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8 <http://liberatedlifeproject.com/2011/11/the-world-is-falling-apart-and-5-reasons-why-that's-a-good-thing/>

Maia Duerr talks about how the challenges we face as a society are an opportunity for profound change. She says, "Liberation is only possible when things fall apart. Only when we are completely willing to let go of where we are can we grow into something else." She says our failing economy is based on greed, but now we have a chance to imagine an economy based on relationship and trust. Our failing environment is polluted, but we are being offered an invitation to live in healing and harmony with the earth. The days of a secure job for life are gone, but we have an opportunity to re-imagine work that draws on our passions and creativity in innovative ways.

We are in the midst of global chaos, and if we can embrace it, we can find help and direction and new blessings. William Bridges said, "Change is a natural process of disorientation and reorientation." All our patterns are being jolted, our boundaries swamped. We must make room for letting go of what has been, and grieve that loss. The in-between time is an emotional time: we may feel shock or confusion, numbness or vertigo. Eventually, if we let the process follow its course, if we care for ourselves and each other through the chaos, we become re-oriented around new patterns in our lives. If we befriend change, rather than clinging to control, we can live to see new wonders.

When the tornado is passing through our lives, we need rituals, both as individuals and as communities. Rituals are there to help us embrace chaos, to let go of clinging to the past. In times of upheaval, meditation and breathing can quiet our hearts and minds, and relieve anxiety. Music and art can nurture us, or taking naps, warm baths, or burning candles. All of these can be rituals to center us through the storm. One of my favorite rituals during disorienting times in my life is the four directions ritual. I literally re-orient myself in space by locating the directions of north, east, south, and west. Then I face each direction, and remind myself what those directions represent to me.

North is the place where my ancestors came from in Canada, and where the north star is constant in the night sky. East is the place of the dawn, the rising of the sun each day. South is where the sun can be found in the winter sky, and where I still have old friends in Massachusetts. West is the place of the setting sun, and where my family lives. Each direction may have a different meaning for you. But by paying attention to where you stand, you can ground yourself in the present moment.

We need rituals for these times of societal change. Rituals in which we can speak our grief, and our hope. Rituals in which to acknowledge the confusion we feel, and to honor the courage we must call upon. Rituals in which we can sing and dance and celebrate the beauty of the present moment, even in the midst of the storm. Rituals that remind us we are together in our desire for a beloved community living in harmony with the earth.

One more important way we take care of ourselves in times of change is to let go of being attached to certain outcomes. Just as we must let go of the past, so we must let go of one idea of the future. Ultimately, we cannot control outcomes. And wisdom tells us that in times of deep crisis we need outcomes beyond what we can already imagine. Remember this: the caterpillar cannot imagine flight. It is something totally new. That is the kind of change for which we hope.

One of the members of my congregation on Cape Cod used to say, "Change is my friend." If we befriend change, if we can be calm in the face of the tornado. If we can place our trust in the love at the heart of all things, then the way will open before us. Aid and support will come from where we least expect it. Blessings will surprise us. May it be so.

*Meditation:*

I invite you now to enter into a ritual meditation space with me, as we together acknowledge the changes we are experiencing, both in our individual lives, and in our wider world.

I invite you to take a time of silence to remember what you have lost, to say goodbye to those who are no longer present with you, to let go of what is past, and to acknowledge the grief or sadness you may feel...

Now take a deep breath, and as you breathe out, release and let go.

I invite you to take a time of silence to experience the chaos in your life, to embrace the confusion which you may feel. Let the wilderness be wilderness, let go of attachment and control, be open to sacred possibilities that may emerge...

Now take a deep calming breath, and feel the love which always holds you in its embrace.

I invite you to take a time of silence to remember the new beginnings in your life, to welcome and celebrate: the new people, the new possibilities, the new love, and even those new things that are just out of sight...

Now take a deep open breath, and as you breathe, embrace what is coming into your life.

*Let us pray:*

Holy Mystery, you brought change into the world through the power of creation,  
Holy Mystery, you let go of the power of control to give us the gift of freedom,  
Holy Mystery, let us be filled with the knowledge of the power of your love,  
that we might walk with peace, with trust, and with hope for all good things to come.  
Blessed be!

*Closing Words*

Agnes de Mille, an American dancer and choreographer said, "Living is a form of not being sure, not knowing what next or how. The moment you know how, you begin to die a little. The artist never entirely knows. We guess. We may be wrong, but we take leap after leap in the dark."