

“Eight Considerations in Re-making Yourself ”
January 7, 2007
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Bruce A. Bode

Quotation for Order of Service

Bess Kingman wasn't interested in trying to improve anybody. Crippled by arthritis and other ailments she didn't even want to think about, she had plenty of time to reflect upon the futility of such endeavors. Despite the continual commercial touting of the notion that a person can make herself into whatever she wants, Bess knew a few important things: 1) You don't get to choose who you are. 2) You don't get to choose who your *parents* are. 3) Already packaged in genetic material, you're dumped into a culture not of your choosing. 4) Things happen to you, not of your choosing. 5) By the time you're old enough to make any improvements, a lot of things are already set. 6) Changes are made at great cost. 7) The choices you have are modest. 8) Being who you are is a lifetime task.

(Marcia Lewton, [Hello, Gorgeous](#), p. 206)

Call to Worship

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather on this first Sunday of the new calendar year.

Here we come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones, to seek that which is permanent, and to serve goodness, beauty, and the qualities of life that make it rich and whole.

Through this hour breathes the worship of all ages, the cathedral music of all history, and blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

Lighting the Chalice

We are travelers. We meet for a moment in this sacred place to love, to share, to serve. Let us use compassion, curiosity, reverence, and respect while seeking our truths. In this way we will support a just and joyful community, and this moment shall endure.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: On this first Sunday of the new calendar year, we gather in our sanctuary to prepare our hearts and minds for the year before us.

CONGREGATION: We do not know what lies ahead of us in this coming year.

MINISTER: There may be challenges we have never had to face before.

CONGREGATION: There may be griefs we have never had to bear before.

MINISTER: There may be kindnesses we have never received before.

CONGREGATION: There may be joys we have never glimpsed before.

MINISTER: What lies ahead of us in this coming year belongs to the unknown.

CONGREGATION: But we have stood before the unknown in previous years and we have found our way.

MINISTER: And, now, with anticipation and wonder, fear and humility, once more we stand before the unknown, trusting that again we will find our way.

CONGREGATION: We depend upon strength and courage that may be more than we now know.

MINISTER: We depend upon resources from hidden springs to arouse and sustain us.

CONGREGATION: And we depend upon each other, for we do not walk alone in this great quest.

MINISTER: We walk together into this new year, strengthening, supporting, encouraging, and caring for each other.

CONGREGATION: One and all we commit ourselves to the unknown, seeking, searching, and ever enlarging the goodness of life and being.

Meditation

As we enter the new year armed, perhaps, with new resolutions, we may be tempted to push aside or overlook certain things in the world and ourselves we think may hinder us from achieving our intended ends. This poem by the Sufi Islamic poet, Rumi, counsels a different way:

This being human is a guest-house –
Every morning a new arrival:
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.

He may be clearing you
out for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.
Say I Am You:

(“The Guest-House,” Poems of Rumi, tr. by John Moyne and Coleman Barks)

Reading

My reading this morning has to do with an acceptance of what is, not looking far beyond the present life and the current situation, not lamenting what is not, but trying somehow to accept and value who we are and what we have and what our station in life is, even though we see the Eternal shining just across the street. This prose piece is from Minnesota poet, Robert Bly, titled “Eleven O’Clock at Night,” from his book, The Man in the Black Coat Turns.

I lie alone in my bed; cooking and stories are over at last, and some peace comes. And what did I do today? I wrote down some thoughts on sacrifice that other people had, but couldn’t relate them to my own life. I brought my daughter to the bus – on the way to Minneapolis for a haircut – and I waited twenty minutes with her in the somnolent hotel lobby. I wanted the mail to bring some praise for my ego to eat, and was disappointed. I added up my bank balance, and found only \$65, when I need over a thousand to pay the bills for this month alone. So this is how my life is passing before the grave?

The walnut of my brain glows. I feel it irradiate the skull. I am aware of the consciousness I have, and I mourn the consciousness I do not have.

Stubborn things lie and stand around me – the walls, a bookcase with its few books, the foot-board of the bed, my shoes that lay against the blanket tentatively, as if they were animals sitting at table, my stomach with its curved demand. I see the bedside lamp, and the thumb of my right hand, the pen my fingers hold so trustingly. There is no way to escape from these. Many time in poems I have escaped – from myself. I sit for hours and at last see a pinhole in the top of the pumpkin, and I slip out that pinhole, gone! The genie expands and is gone; no one can get him back in the bottle again; he is hovering over a car cemetery somewhere.

Now more and more I long for what I cannot escape from. The sun shines on the side of the house across the street. Eternity is near, but it is not here. My shoes, my thumbs, my stomach, remain inside the room, and for that there is no solution. Consciousness comes so slowly, half our life passes, we eat and talk asleep – and for

that there is no solution. Since Pythagoras died the world has gone down a certain path, and I cannot change that. Someone not in my family invented the microscope, and Western eyes grew the intense will to pierce down through its darkening tunnel. Air itself is willing without pay to lift the 707's wing, and for that there is no solution. Pistons and rings have appeared in the world; valves usher gas vapor in and out of the theater box ten times a second; and for that there is no solution. Something besides my will loves the woman I love. I love my children, though I did not know them before they came. I change every day. For the winter dark of late December there is no solution.

“EIGHT CONSIDERATIONS IN RE-MAKING YOURSELF”

Introduction

The beginning of a calendar year is a customary time for taking personal inventory, for looking back and looking forward, and for considering adjustments to one's life. For many, it's a time of setting goals and making resolutions of intended change for the coming year. And, as the quotation at the top of the Order of Service this morning points out, there is a “continual commercial touting of the notion that a person can make herself into whatever she wants.”

On the other hand, there are also a number of quips, which you can find readily available on the Internet, indicating that our new years' resolutions really don't amount to much. Mark Twain has a couple:

Now [New Year's Day] is the accepted time to make your regular annual good resolutions. Next week you can begin paving hell with them as usual.

A new oath holds pretty well; but... when it is become old, and frayed out, and damaged by a dozen annual retryings of its remains, it ceases to be serviceable; any little strain will snap it.

(Mark Twain, speech in New York City, 31 March 1885)

Or this from F. M. Knowles:

He who breaks a resolution is a weakling; he who makes one is a fool.

So my inquiry at the beginning of this new calendar year, which I invite you to reflect on with me, is:

To what extent can you remake yourself?

To what degree is your life malleable?

What are the parameters of human freedom?

How much can you expect out of your new years' resolutions?

A couple of months ago I found a handy, ready-made list to assist me in reflecting on these questions. They are the considerations and conclusions that a character in Marcia Lewton's recently-published novel, *Hello, Gorgeous*, had come to – eight different conclusions or considerations. You can find them printed in the quotation at the top of your Order of Service.

These considerations come from a character in the novel, an elderly woman by the name of Bess Kingman, who lives in a care facility.

When reading a novel one shouldn't, of course, assume that the statements of a given character represent the position of the novelist. But, since this novelist is a member of this congregation, I had an opportunity to interview her this past week about the novel and, in particular, about the opinions expressed by Bess Kingman.

I asked the novelist whether these succinctly stated life-conclusions of Bess Kingman's were part of a list that she – the novelist – had been working on and amending over the years, or whether they just tumbled out in her writing. The novelist replied that, "These statements had more or less written themselves in the normal course of writing, but that, of course, there was a fair amount of life experience and personal reflection in back of these statements."

The novelist added that this character, who only appears twice in the novel, "brought a breath of fresh air and good sense to the story."

So now I'd like to take you through these eight "important things" that Bess Kingman had learned about life and about our capacity for improving and re-making ourselves and others, beginning with:

1) You don't get to choose who you are.

Though there are some philosophies that hold that one is choosing their present life based on previous lives, this apparently is not something that Bess Kingman holds to, nor do I. Rather, it would seem, we wake up to a world not of our own making. Nor is the creature we are something of our own choosing – not the fact of being a human being or anything about the particularities of being a human being – not our sex, our shape, our size, our mental capabilities, or our physical capacities; nor the century, millennium, or age into which we are born and have come to consciousness.

And not only do we not choose the type of life-form that we will be, but we do not choose the planet, solar system, galaxy, or galactic system into which we appear. None of this is of our own choosing; all of it is given. So far as we know, we do not have anything consciously to do with any of this.

One of the ironies and paradoxes of being born human is that we have the sense of being free and of having choices. The extent – or even the reality – of that freedom is endlessly debated, but this sense of being free and having choices is a sense that, paradoxically, we

cannot escape from. Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams expresses the paradox in these words:

... humans must *choose*. We cannot escape making a choice.... Freedom is our fate as well as our birthright, and we cannot, even if we wish to, slide back into vegetability. Even the abuse of freedom is a use of freedom.... *We have no choice but to be free...*

But, as I am indicating, this sense of freedom that we experience is always held in relation to what is given, what has gone before, and what is not chosen. Thus, theologian Paul Tillich speaks of freedom and destiny as being two poles of our existence that are always and forever in relation to each other, two poles of a larger process.

At every moment our freedom of choice is related to the other pole of everything that has gone before. And each new decision, each choice, each response to one's situation from the pole of freedom immediately becomes part of the other pole, the pole of destiny.

One might, therefore, argue – as I will this morning – that the breadth and depth and extent of our freedom is related to the knowledge of our destiny. Our freedom is paradoxically related to learning more about the limits of our ability to change and shift things around.

So let's move on to more of these limits, which Bess Kingman has learned over a lifetime.

2) You don't get to choose who your *parents* are.

Again, there are those philosophies that hold that one chooses one's parents. And, again, apparently Bess doesn't believe that, nor do I. In other words, we don't get to choose those persons who are likely to have the most impact and influence on our lives.

Not only do our parents give us life, but our lives are held in their hands.

Not only do they give and hold our lives, but our genetic heritage is received from them – our intelligence, our energy, our physical strength, our disposition, and so forth.

Not only do we receive our genetic heritage from our parents, but they also are most likely to give us our education, our training, our language, our religion.

Furthermore, we are programmed by our genetics to lock onto to our parents. And if they are absent, we might spend a lifetime in search of them.

Parents are like gods to us. They will always play a special role in our lives ... will always carry a special energy ... will never be just another person to us.

And all of this is beyond our choosing.

3) Already packaged in genetic material, you're dumped into a culture not of your choosing.

Again, we don't choose our culture, but consider how important that is – culture and country. You do not choose it, but you are programmed to latch on to your culture, or at least to try to latch on to your culture.

Yet so much of one's life and its quality will be determined by one's culture and by one's capacity to connect to it. Further, the skills, aptitudes, and interests that might work in one culture may not be well-suited for another culture.

I have a friend, author Robert A. Johnson, now 86, who in mid-life gathered up the courage and resources to make a trip to India. He was drawn there sensing there was something in India he needed that he couldn't find in his own culture. And, indeed, immediately upon arriving in India – not new India, but old India – he felt at home in ways he had never felt at home before in his own culture.

And, thereafter, every year until it became too physically difficult for him, he would make a sojourn to India for several months, simply to soak up that which sustained his soul and spirit in this culture that seemed a better match for his own native temperament and typology.

And then every time when he needed to return to this culture, he had to brace himself for re-entry, a process much more difficult than the dislocation of jetlag.

4) Things happen to you, not of your choosing.

As you look back at your life, how much of it, would you say, is of your own choosing? As you look upon the fact that you are here today in this room with these people, how much would you say is due to your own choice? How did you get here really?

I suppose you can play it both ways, saying, on the one hand, there have been a great many choices that have brought me here today. And, on the other hand, in looking back you may say, most of the reasons I am here had little to do with my own choices.

You can say, for example, that you choose a life partner, if you have one. But have you really? Suppose she wasn't in the library that night when you just happened to be there studying. And suppose that her hair, instead of being long and luscious and flowing, had been rolled up in curlers. Hypothetical examples, of course, but just suppose....

Additionally, doesn't most real change come into our lives as responses to events that are not of our choosing – and actually are things that are against our will, like accidents, illnesses, job lay-offs? We tend to change only when forced to do so by outer necessity.

5) By the time you're old enough to make any improvements, a lot of things are already set.

Some years ago I viewed a golf instruction video by Jack Nicklaus, the person generally recognized as the greatest golfer of the 20th century. That torch, in the 21st century, has been passed to Tiger Woods. In this video, Nicklaus was demonstrating a proper putting style, and he commented on his own putting stance, a stance in which he set his head slightly behind the ball rather than directly over it. This was the way he had picked up the game, the habit he had gotten into.

But he said that if it wasn't such a habit, and if could do it over again, he would redo it, so that his head was directly over the ball instead of just slightly behind it. But now, with the habit so deeply ingrained, it wasn't worth it. It would take too much effort to undo what had been done – just that move of a couple of inches.

This leads to a sixth “important thing” that Bess Kingman knew:

6) Changes are made at great cost.

Deliberate change takes great effort.

I think in this regard of the many twelve-step programs around. These are programs and groups – and I value them – that are formed to try to come to grip with some problem or another. And the problem, the habit, or the behavior being dealt with – whether related to drinking, eating, smoking, gambling, sex activity, or being an enabler of any of these – is one that is not wanted and often very destructive to one's self and others. And, often, there is apparently great impetus for changing the behavior.

And yet look at what it takes to change this one habit or pattern or type of behavior. It takes a tremendous effort of the will. It takes a group effort. It takes a group that is a near-religious in its fervor to try to make the change. And the success rate of making the change is not high, and the possibility of relapse very great. And even if the change is made, the concern may still dominate one throughout a lifetime, so that, in one sense, one is never really free from it.

Interesting also to me is the technique used to bring about these changes of behavior. In the twelve-step programs, the first step in trying to deal with addictions is to admit the powerlessness of the conscious will to deal with the situation. In Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, the first step is to say: “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol--that our lives had become unmanageable.”

In other words, paradoxically, the conscious will only gains power to control its behavior when it admits it is powerless, when it admits that the force with which it is engaged is more powerful than it is. A frontal attack on this force doesn't seem to yield results.

I wonder also if addiction isn't, in the first place, related to and caused by the conscious will wanting to have its own way – so that the deeper self and the wisdom of the body has been previously passed over and disregarded.

Whatever the case, a change in established patterns and habits comes only with maximum attention and at great cost.

Thus, I think of the attempt to change as being more like turning a great ship at sea or trying to stop a locomotive than like the quick turning of a car or bicycle.

7) **The choices you have are modest.**

When you consider all of the above elements, then one may also realize that the choices one has are really quite modest.

Our present universe, it is estimated, has now been in existence about thirteen and a half billion years, if I recall correctly. And our earth for several billion as well. (It has taken quite a long time for a species to recognize these facts, and there are many within this species that don't recognize these facts.) But when you consider all of this prior force and direction, then the choices we have are really quite modest.

A tremendous amount of momentum has been built up in and through our evolutionary past. And for most creatures the basic system is pretty well set. Thus, the choices are relatively small and the possibilities relatively limited.

And, if I might add yet one more "important thing" to Bess Kingman's list, it would be this: Not only are the changes modest, but with regard to change, you can never do just one thing.

This is a saying I picked up from environmentalist, Garrett Hardin. And, of course, example after example can be given in the environmental realm of introducing something into the environment to solve one problem that just creates a whole new set of problems – "the law of unintended consequences."

Thus, you might like to change a given thing about yourself, but that one thing is attached to everything.

Says Joseph Campbell, "Beware in casting out your demons that you don't also cast out the best that is in you."

What does all this mean?

So what do all of these things come to? Does it mean we have no free will, or that change is impossible? Does it mean we should just give ourselves over to habits that may be destroying our bodies, our minds, our relationships, our society?

No, I don't think it means that at all. But consider whether it might mean the following:

First, freedom, as I am saying, is related to understanding and accepting limitation and boundaries. You gain freedom to the extent that you understand the forces of destiny that are involved ... which can be a tremendous relief. When you stop thinking that you are or should be in control of everything, paradoxically, this frees you to respond to the situation in a positive way instead of beating up on yourself for not controlling the situation.

Second, if you're a person who seems to have a need to set goals or make resolutions, consider whether goals don't just set you up for failure or immediately bring in resistance. That is to say, some part of you doesn't want this to happen or it would have already happened.

But if you insist that you must have goals, consider setting goals that you know you can achieve. The author of *Hello, Gorgeous*, suggests, "Eat more chocolate." Or a second goal she suggests, "Free yourself from the horrible obligation of having to change yourself."

The idea here is to look for which way the stream is already flowing and flow with it – as in Taoist philosophy. Or, says the author of *Hello, Gorgeous*, "Once you accept the fact that it's downhill all the way, you have a lot more fun."

So, do you know where the energy is in your life? Find a way to go with the energy. Where does the body and mind want to go? Don't be afraid to ask it. Find out if there is a way that you can work together.

I note, for example, that I get exercise much more easily as a by-product of some activity or sport that I enjoy than when I am lashed to some piece of exercise equipment.

So find a stream that the body wants to jump into and jump.

Also note that a stream doesn't typically flow in a straight line. It meanders; it changes direction; it loops back on itself.

Third, along with this idea of change not being a direct, straight-line shot is the recognition that change and understanding comes slowly. Consciousness comes ever so slowly, as in the reading from Robert Bly earlier in this service.

Or take a look sometime at the movie, *Groundhog Day*, with Bill Murray. He has the opportunity – an unwelcomed one – to keep living the same day over and over and over and over again, stepping in the same holes over and over and over again and again, until finally he begins to get it and slowly, very slowly, and through much trial and error, begins to adapt and change his behavior.

Fourth, recognize that real change comes not from pushing away bad habits, bad thoughts, bad desires, and bad motives, but in recognizing, greeting, naming, and dealing

with these parts of one's self. All these things labeled "bad" come from the same ground of being. As you push them away, they only grow in their resistance and get "badder."

"Don't think of an elephant?" Of course, the more you try not to think of elephant, the longer that elephant will stay in the room of your mind.

Fifth, recognize that thinking of something or imagining doing something is not the same as doing that thing. Author Robert Johnson, who I mentioned earlier, suggests that the unconscious doesn't know the difference between an act in what we call the "real world" and the imaginative world. To the unconscious, a symbolic act works as well as a "real world" act. Thus, you might try eating a box of symbolic chocolates sometime and see what that tastes like.

Sixth, consider cutting yourself and others some slack. We have not invented the universe or ourselves. We find ourselves in the universe. The problems we deal with are not problems, first of all, of our own making. In one sense, our problems are the universe's problems. The universe is working itself out in us – and it has been at it a long time. And it may take yet some more time until it figures things out.

And this leads to the final and culminating "important thing" that Bess Kingman has learned, namely:

8) "Being who you are is a lifetime task."

Like life itself, being who you are it is never-ending thing. And it involves gathering all the parts of oneself – not throwing anything away, but rather gathering, collecting, naming, and embracing.

The novel ends with a sermon by a flawed main character, who happens to be a minister, the Rev. Corky Pearlman. And so let me end this sermon with a portion of his sermon, probably the last one he will ever give because of his past actions, a sermon that was prepared to be delivered to persons in the retirement village where Bess Kingman lived. Here are some portions of that sermon, and with this I conclude:

"Do you know who you are?... Do you belong to yourself?"

"I am asking you, in your late years, to think about this question. Why, you might ask. What difference does it make?"

"If there is any meaning at all in an individual life, I believe it lies in becoming and acknowledging who you are, then acting in accordance with that knowledge. I say this, knowing it goes against the common wisdom. Most of us spend our lives trying to become what we *aren't*, trying to *overcome* what we are, trying to be like someone else, someone we admire, someone whose fatal flaws and inner sorrows we're not aware of...."

“Haven’t we all had the experience of hearing someone say to us, ‘Now I know what you really are!’ This is usually said at a time when we’ve behaved badly and have been found out. We’re summed up, then. Our totality is contained in a single act.

“That single act is certainly part of who and what we are, no question about it. We have to open ourselves to include our bad behavior in its proper place. But notice that I say “include” and I say “proper place”. Our bad behavior is not the sum total of who we are.

“I believe that when we get to the gate of Heaven, whether it’s heaven here and now or a heaven later on, when we get to that gate, Saint Peter will already have a full description of us as God knows us, as we somehow know ourselves deep inside, who and what we are, complete. He’ll have a scroll for each one of us with a full and accurate picture on it. We will be obliged to match that description with our own, and we won’t enter heaven for keeps until we’ve fully realized every aspect of who we are and what we’ve done. Keeping part of ourselves hidden, not only from others but even from ourselves, is like trying to enter heaven with one of our feet missing. You just can’t get there that way. You have to enter heaven whole, with all your parts gathered up and assembled.

“If you come to the edge of Heaven, and you can see it waiting, if only you could get there, Saint Peter will look you over and listen to your account of who you are and what you’ve done with your attributes. If there are parts missing, he will send you out to gather them up. He’ll say, “Go back and dig up that sullied hand you buried. That hand is part of you, and Heaven does not open to persons with parts missing....

“...it isn’t that you need to *change* thus-and-such to find happiness in Heaven. It’s that you need to acknowledge it as part and parcel of your life, of your place on earth. You need to *accept* who you are, not change it.

“I want to make it clear that I am not advocating acting out bad behavior when I urge you to accept your undesirable traits. There’s a vast difference between accepting who you are and using that as an excuse for sinfulness.

“Sometimes you need to acknowledge a part of yourself that has to be kept closely in check. Suppose you are inclined to violence. Acknowledging it does not include acting violently. Suppose you yearn for material things. Acknowledging your desire does not excuse you spending beyond your means. If you are crippled by a black heart, then you must take care to act with compassion *intentionally*, knowing that you can’t count on spontaneous compassion.

“When you feel the violence or the yearning arise in you, the thing to do is recognize it, name it to yourself – say “desire” to yourself several times, or “yearning”, whatever word it takes to get it right – and then put it aside and go about your business.

“This practice, followed faithfully, allows you to be who you are while acting responsibly in the world, and it carries you through the gate of Heaven.”...

“I’m talking about *salvation* here, my friends...salvation means gathering up all the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. There is no heaven, to me, like the heaven of fully belonging to myself, of being firmly rooted in my own soil.

“Think of a tree. It reaches up, stretches its branches like arms to embrace heaven. But if it is not firmly rooted, it leans or even topples. When a tree is in its proper place, roots down and branches open, it touches heaven, and so do we. Have you not all experienced those moments when you are fully yourself and the thought comes to you: *this is what I’m here for!* I believe those moments constitute heaven. They are the precious jewels strung on the necklace of our life.”

(Hello, Gorgeous, pp. 494-497)

Benediction

May peace be in our hearts,
and understanding in our minds,
may courage steel our wills,
and the love of truth forever guide us. Amen.

Extinguishing of Chalice

We extinguish our chalice
But not the light of truth,
The warmth of community,
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on the first Sunday of the new year, January 7, 2007. The spoken service, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)