

Rev. Mark Robel  
“Growing Pains”  
Nov 13, 2022

Tom and I have been together for 22 plus years. In those 22 years, we have moved 8 times – much to Tom’s dismay! He has always been a creature of habit – eats the same thing (mostly) for breakfast and lunch. He parks in the exact same parking space at work every day. He has his routine, it works for him, and he sticks to it.

I on the other hand, have always, always lived on the edge of the unknown. My life – even today – is filled with “what if?” or “I wonder how that would be?” As I look over the trajectory of my life, both personal and professional, I see myself wanting to be a park ranger, a farmer, a priest, a nurse and now a minister. My life has been full, and exciting, and fun...but has come with some good amount of pain for making the decision to change.

Change is a funny thing – it can be a decision we consciously make and move forward to where it takes us, or it can be unwanted change that drags us along – even when we’re kicking and screaming.

Rev. Amanda Poppei, while discussing the changes in her own life writes:

*“Sometimes our becomings are dramatic: we realize that the gender we thought we were, or others thought we were, isn't correct after all; or we discover that the career we had planned or the marriage we had begun isn't really who we are or is no longer right for who we have become.*

*Sometimes, though, our becoming is gradual, a kind of unfolding and changing and shifting over time. Always, it is lifelong. Which isn't to say we aren't already who we are—we are that, too. We are already ourselves, the minute we are born, and every minute thereafter. However long our lives end up being, even when they are cut painfully and tragically short, we are our full selves for every second, every month, every year of those lives. And we are also becoming ourselves, growing and stretching.*

*In the “growing” time of my life, my soul experienced something like the growing pains I remembered in my legs as a child. I became a minister; a mother; a middle-aged person. It’s usually been uncomfortable, and almost always inconvenient. The old me seemed fine, the one I was just*

***yesterday; why bother with all this shifting? And yet when I come out the other side, I invariably think, Ah yes: this is the me I was supposed to become. This is who I am. Until next time. Who is it going to be?"***

I personally really relate to Rev Amanda's description of becoming. Yes, we are ourselves from the day we are born, yet we are continually in the process of changing and becoming something or someone else. And on the other side of that change, we are hopefully, once again our true authentic self.

But change is also oftentimes painful. I'm thinking about relationships, marriages, partnerships or even friendships. These relationships challenge us, take us to limits where we would most likely not go by ourselves. Personal human relationships stretch our capacity for patience, support, understanding and even love.

Exactly one week after I was ordained, I married a couple who I met with extensively for several months before the wedding. The woman was a coworker and I had known her for several years and her fiancé was soft spoken and kind. They were a couple that were meant for each other, truly in love and ready to begin their lives together.

A few months ago, I ran into my coworker and found out that they had filed for divorce – and I almost fell over. First of all, they seemed to me like a perfect match for each other, and second, it was my very first official duty as a minister. Not a good beginning track record! When I asked her what had happened, she told me that they both were changing (which is to be expected) but they were not able to continue to support each other as they changed. These two were not young, either. This was the second marriage for both of them. She told me how painful this breakup was for her, even worse than the ending of her first marriage, but the relationship had stopped working so they split up. So often our culture presents the ideal marriage relationship, or partnership, or even friendship as something other than reality – in love forever, a constant and full feeling of love at all times, for all time. And the reality really does not line up. We are constantly changing. Not only will each partner in the relationship grow and mature at their own rate and pace, the feelings of affection and attraction have more 'ebb and flow' to them than 'constant current.'

The story of course is much more complicated than I'm telling it now, but the bottom line is that this couple were stretched in their relationship – like a rubber band – and the rubber band snapped.

Change – now generally speaking, we Unitarian Universalists are always open and game for change, right? We love novelty, we like to experience new things in terms of our theology and ritual. We are not satisfied with rigid traditions, nor do we settle for centuries old answers to life's deepest questions. And we LOVE social change! We are often on the forefront of progressive movements. That's who we are – we are wide-eyed, world focused, change the world kind of people, and by the way, let's have fun while we do it.

But sometime for me, this is exhausting. As much as I adore change, there are times that the thought of all that need to be done – all of the good work we are doing or want to do – is overwhelming. This past week I spent every waking moment in front of my computer streaming pre-election, election, and post-election results and commentaries. I watched the number roll in with the most competitive races. I tracked who was ahead, who was moving ahead, and who was behind. By yesterday morning, I was exhausted. My desire – my need – for change in our country was beginning to cause me stress and anxiety. So, for the day yesterday, I decided not to watch the news, not to track the numbers, and let what was happening just happen. It was causing me much too much angst – even watching from the sidelines. My point in telling this story is for us to remember that sometimes, as much as we see and know that change is necessary, and understand that it may be painful, we also need to be gentle with ourselves. We also must understand that our calling is not only to individually change the world. Our calling is also a collective calling, bore by all of us.

But now back to our personal, individual change. In is work on life transitions, William Bridges describes the three phases of any given life change:

- 1. Endings**
- 2. Neutrality (or in the religious sense – in the wilderness)**
- 3. Launching the new**

These stages kind of remind me of the stages of grief, in that they happen in no particular order, moving in and out of each stage, and even perhaps living in a bit of all three at once, but finally making our way through to the other end. To launch anew.

Bridges writes ***“We have to let go of the prior thing before we can pick up the new – not just outwardly, but inwardly where we keep our connections to the people and places that act as definitions of who we are.”***

Letting go of the old to move into the new...this is the place that can be painful, this is the place that can make us lose our footing and wonder will I ever get out of this wilderness? And this is where our faith, as Unitarian Universalists can help carry us across the finish line. In my welcome each week I remind all of us that here our religious creed is love and our religious practice is love. As UU's, we promise to support and encourage, we promise to take each other's hands and walk with each other across the finish line. And we promise to always love. And through our own personal journey of change, or even through this community's journey of change, we are there for each other, we show up for each other – to help lessen the pain of letting go, and to celebrate the becoming anew.

So, for all of the transitions we find ourselves in, for the endings they require, what wilderness we wander in, and the new beginnings we strive for – let us walk together, hand in hand. Bless this path. And remember to remind each other to breathe! (Bridges, adapted)

May it be so.