

“Growing Pains”
by Rev. Meghan Cefalu
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In my other life – when I was studying to become a psychologist – I came across a questionnaire that is used in quantitatively assessing the amount of stress in a person’s life. The questionnaire consists of a list of fifty or so different life events. The person filling it out is instructed to put a checkmark next to the ones that have occurred in their life in the last twelve months. Each question is assigned a point value with some scoring higher than others.

There were some events with predictably low point values like: “Have you started shopping at a different grocery store? Or modified your eating habits? Or changed banks?

Some of the questions with the highest point values were things like: “Have you moved to a new town? Lost a parent, child or close friend? Been in a major car accident? Or through a divorce?

What puzzled me at first was there were some questions with really high point values that one would not think of as having a negative impact. They were the kind of things that most of us would welcome with open arms. Questions like: “Have you received a significant raise at work? Won the lottery? Gotten married? Received an inheritance? Graduated from school?

It was explained in the scoring section of the questionnaire that even these seemingly wonderful events can add tremendous stress to our lives simply because of the changes they cause.

So hypothetically a person who had a baby, got a promotion and received a large inheritance could add up the point values and discover they have the same stress score as someone who lost their job, got divorced, and was diagnosed with cancer. The *quality* of the two lives are, of course, very different - one is filled with joy and the other with sorrow and loss. But the *quantity* of upheaval that accompanies those big shifts can be equal.

It could not have been a better time for me to have learned about this stress assessment tool. To the outside observer my life was just terrific. I was on track to bigger and better things. I had quit a dead-end job, started graduate school, moved to a new city and ended a dysfunctional relationship all in the previous year. Yet I was feeling stressed out, anxious and even depressed at times. When I added up all the points my live events received I found a degree of comfort in my high score.

I have come to understand that this phenomenon is just as true for families and larger communities as it is for individual people. Anything that causes change to a system stresses the system.

Even this congregation’s recent growth, which we welcome and celebrate, causes some stress. As more people find their spiritual home in our community we are finding we need to make adjustments to the way we do things. More people means more

complexity. The same system that easily supported seventy five members will no longer support one hundred and ten.

For example, just a couple of years ago we had two Religious Education teachers who taught the four or five or maybe even eight children on a good week. Now we often have over twenty children and babies on a Sunday morning. These young people invigorate our congregation with their laughter and bright smiles. And at the same time, the old system no longer works. We have had to make changes. Marilyn Winters has taken on the duties of the Director of Religious Education, we've hired Barbara Price to care for our babies and we have begun recruiting more parents to become teachers – and we need still more.

Unfortunately, too often what happens is we only discover the need to make a systemic change when there is a breakdown. People reach a point of exhaustion or exasperation and then feelings get hurt.

It is my hope that when we as a whole are mindful of the stress that our congregation's growth causes we can anticipate some of the pitfalls – or at least be more forgiving of ourselves and one another when we fall into them. A more mindful approach will strengthen our ability to cope with one another's pain and enable us to move more consciously, and less reactively, through the inevitable chaotic periods we will have as we grow.

That is why I think it is so important for all of us to attend the “Growing Together” workshop next Saturday. Not only will we be working towards a decision about the next steps the congregation will take, but even more importantly, we will learn some invaluable skills that will help us navigate even the most conflict-prone conversations while exercising care for one another. These are things that will easily translate into other areas of our lives; family disagreements or troubles at work.

Growth can be hard because of our natural resistance to change. But there is a way we can consciously overcome the resistance and begin to find our way through any period of chaos that change brings with courage, faith and compassion.

One of the greatest minds of social change, Saul Alinsky, states quite simply why change is so difficult. He said, “Change means movement. Movement means friction.”¹

Change challenges inertia, disrupts the status quo, disturbs homeostasis. Faced with a different way of doing things a person, or a system, instinctively resists. We dig our heels in.

I have to confess something about myself here. I have become aware in the last several years that I am what I call a “slow transitioner”. It takes me a minute to adjust to new ideas or information. Now that I am conscious of this quirk I can work with it.

¹ Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals* 1971.

Here's how it might play out: On the way to town on Friday night Chris says, "Hey, instead of a movie, what about going to hear some music?" I then feel myself freeze up. My initial, knee-jerk reaction is always, "No, I want to see the movie we picked out!"

It doesn't even matter if the new plan is better than the old one. I simply resist the change. But now that we both know this about me he might say, "Hey, think about the idea of going to hear some music instead of seeing that movie tonight." Then we both wait a few minutes. I can still hear my first reaction in my head, but I expect it now, and am even amused by it. That little bit of space allows me to ponder the other option. As it turns out, my carefully considered response always more accurately reflects my true wishes.

Benedictine sister Joan Chittister suggests that even traumatic events can be a catalyst for personal transformation. She writes,

"When life changes under our feet, despite our resistance, without our permission, it is an invitation to growth. When I rail and balk at its changing, when I run and hide from the changes, when I struggle against the tides of life in order to cling to every earlier stage, it is a sure sign that I am not finished yet."²

It is our inner resistance that helps us to know where our growing edges are. Resistance is defined as an "oppositional force". In psychology it is understood as opposition to an attempt to bring repressed thoughts or feelings into consciousness.

Similarly, meditation teachers tell us that those discomforts and itches and endless streams of thoughts and waves of emotion that happen to us when we are sitting in stillness are simply due to our mind's resistance to the deeper states of consciousness we are reaching. They maintain that it is the resistance itself that is the source of the discomfort – and not the thing we are actually resisting.

Becoming aware of our resistance is an important first step. It takes courage to step back and notice the pain amidst our struggling and yet also look beyond it. It can take even more courage to notice other people's pain and help them look beyond it.

Peter Steinke is a well known consultant and educator in the small, peculiar field of congregational systems. In a keynote address to congregational lay leaders a couple of years ago he discussed the role of pain in growth. He said,

"The degree to which you can tolerate pain in others is the degree to which they will grow. If you attempt to modify someone's pain, you are in effect limiting their growth." He says that, "Most helpers are too sensitive to [other's] pain and feel uncomfortable about it and want to alleviate it. We try to alleviate it not because we are caring, but because we feel awkward in its presence."³

² Joan D. Chittister *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope* (2003) P22.

³ Peter Steinke, UU University Keynote Address 2006

There is a period of time in the midst of major change that is by nature a little chaotic. The old system no longer works and the new one is not settled in just yet. During this time of upheaval we can turn to our faith to carry us through.

Now I know faith is a tricky word for UUs to be throwing around. But what I mean is: find what it is in you that allows you to trust that even in the midst of chaos, when you have lost your bearings, all will be well.

I have faith that love is stronger than fear. It is true that fear can make a lot of noise and is usually the first to get our attention when we are taken off guard. But it is no match for the power and strength that love wields.

Thich Nhat Hahn's poem that Anita read asks us to stretch our imagination to imagine being all the characters in the story at once. Spiritual teachers write poems like these to help us develop our capacity for compassion. In our community it might sound like this:

"I am the man who walked in these doors for the first time today, nervous and hopeful about what I might find. And I am the woman who screws up my courage to reach out my hand and warmly welcome him.

I am the brand new member all fired up with ideas and energy to create new and exciting programs. And I am the founding member who has already given uncountable volunteer hours and written hundreds of checks to support this community as it has grown from 20 people to over 100.

I am the leader who, feeling unsupported and frustrated by yet one more breakdown in communication, lashes out in anger. And I am the one who receives the angry phone call, tears my eyes as I struggle to find the right words to set things right."

We are going through a period of lots of transitions. Many new people are coming in to leadership positions while others are stepping down. We are in the middle of this year's annual pledge drive. Asking ourselves and one another to consider increasing the amount of money we give so that we can support and sustain this community's goals and dreams. And, on top of all that, we are at a crossroads. The congregation will be asked to choose a direction to facilitate the future growth of this community.

If this congregation could fill out a that stress questionnaire I think we would all feel gratified to see our high score. Friends, this is stressful!

Let us keep in mind that we are all doing the best we can for this community. We all want what is in the highest good for one another, for our church, for Unitarian Universalism, and for all beings that share our planetary home.

Let us hold before us the truth that our connections to one another are the most important element. This community is not defined by this building, or the programs, or even by your minister. This community is none other than the relationships we create with the other people here.

Let us remember these things: Growth means change. Change creates resistance. Resistance causes discomfort.

But also: We can become aware of the resistance and use it as a tool for our spiritual development. Choose to have courage to be with discomfort, yours and someone else's. Have compassion for yourself and one another. And trust, with me, that love is always stronger than fear.

Amen.