

**Personal Evolutions**  
**Ways in Which I've Changed During the Past Nine Years**  
**By**  
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A friend sent me an email this past week that included a brief comment stated by a delegate at the 1961 General Assembly in Boston regarding what was then the proposed Association of Unitarianism and Universalism. "When there is decay, there is merger. When there's energy, there's schism." In opposition to the formation of the Unitarian Universalist Association, like a good Unitarian, the delegate was using an analogy from science. For instance, two stars locked together in orbit accelerates their decay, and causes them to combine in the process. In her 2014 book on the subject, Dutch scientist Christina Korntreff explains, "binary systems processed by the gas-induced orbital decay are more likely to merge."<sup>1</sup> This is also true on a microscopic level. Fungus, for example, causes wood to rot by creating cavities in it. As the rate of decay increases the cavities merge together.<sup>2</sup> The more they merge, the faster the wood breaks down.

The converse is also true, energy causes thing to break up. When particles are heated, for example, they gain energy and, in the process, expand and vibrate, causing them to break free of their surrounding structures. This is why our own resident physicist, Bob Cook, often says, "No friction, no motion." Friction causes heat, heat causes energy, and energy makes things grow and become more independent. "When there is decay, there is merger. When there's energy, there's schism."

This reminds me of another saying by Master Morehei Ueshiba, the founder of Aikido, "Life is growth. If we stop growing, technically and spiritually, we are as good as dead."<sup>3</sup> The point I'm making is that we have to keep growing because the only alternative is death and decay. "You can't step twice into the same river," Heraclitus said, because everything is always changing. Staying the same means death. Homogeneity means boredom. Equilibrium means game over. All things seeks states of equilibrium, but it is the collision of opposites that lead to change, diversity, life, and growth. Cold and hot don't simply merge to become cool or warm, they clash, causing wind, rain, thunder, and lightning in the process. Mountains are hewn and valley's forged by the clash of opposing tectonic forces. Life evolves only by facing adversity.

Erich Fromm says, "The duty to be alive is the same as the duty to become oneself."<sup>4</sup> Yet he also says we all die before we are "fully born"<sup>5</sup> because we have the potential to keep evolving until our very last breath. Only in death do we stop growing, or, at least, death should be the

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<sup>1</sup> Korntreff, Christina, "Numerical simulation of gas-induced orbital decay of binary systems in young clusters," *Schriften des Forschungszentrums Julich*, vol. 25, 2014, p. 86.

<sup>2</sup> Schwarze, Francis W.M.R.; Engels, Julia; Mattheck, Claus, *Fungal Strategies of Wood Decay in Trees*, Springer Verlag, Germany, New York, 2000, p. 114.

<sup>3</sup> Ueshiba, Morehei, *The Art of Peace*, Stevens, John, Trans & Ed., Shambala Press, Boston, MA, 2002, p. 23

<sup>4</sup> Fromm, Erich, *The Sane Society*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, NY, 1955, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, Henry Holt & Company, New York, NY, 1947, p. 91.

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only time we stop growing. Rigidity is a mark of morbidity, but it's possible to resist growing and changing while we are alive by letting spiritual, emotional, and intellectual rigidity set in—becoming set, or frozen, in our ways.

Of course, there are some who consider change a sin, if not a crime. We're not only expected not to change as individuals, but to hold some of the very same habits and ideologies held and practiced by our dead ancestors. This is the way to assure our societies remain the same, which can lead to decay and death because they cannot adapt to unexpected changes in the environment. "Life is growth. If we stop growing, technically and spiritually, we are as good as dead," which is true for societies, communities, and organizations as much as it is for individuals.

As far as I'm concerned this is all good. I'd hate to be the same person I was forty, or twenty, or ten years ago. Thank goodness we can learn from our mistakes, grow beyond them, and not be defined by them. How rewarding it is to discover new ideas, and beneficial to discard those that no longer work for us or were wrong to begin with. Who wants to live according to untruths? Not me. Maybe we can't teach an old dog a new trick, but thanks to the enduring neuroplasticity of the human brain, we can change our minds and learn new tricks throughout our lives. Change isn't an insult, it's life. Otherwise we're like all those useless "zombie" cells inside our bodies, that can't reproduce but don't really die and go away, causing all kinds of inflammation that leads to aging and illness, or, in scientific terms, to decay. "Life is growth," and if we're not growing, "we're as good as dead."

In two weeks, it will be exactly nine years since I started as your minister, and I like to think I've evolved in many ways since then. Perhaps there are some things about one's character that remain fundamentally unchanged, but our mindset, ethics, beliefs, knowledge, passions, interests, friendships, and so much else, continue to evolve, if the gravitational pull toward sameness hasn't caused us to enter into a life of decay and spiritual death. As I examine my own life, I recognize a lot of significant changes over the past decade.

I was 48 years old back then and could still see perfectly without glasses. Shortly after my arrival, however, I began experiencing weird headaches and lightheadedness. My doctors couldn't figure out what was happening, after months of trying, but ruled out anything serious. I finally discovered on my own that the cause was my weakening eyes and the constant strain of keeping things in focus. So I went immediately from no glasses to blended trifocals, and today can't see anything clearly without them, near or far. That's not evolution, but it shows how much things can change in just a short time and may be a metaphor of the how my view of the world has continued to change since then too.

It was also about that time that a philosophical change in my mindset began to sink in. I came here right after completing my dissertation. In fact, I gave its defense over the phone while I was candidating here to be your minister. There was a lot I learned while writing and researching my dissertation, which was on the psychology of religion, but one of the things that most impacted me was discovering that extreme fear and paranoia is a characteristic of the fundamentalist mindset, which I consider a mental disorder because it has all the earmarks of fixation, of being stuck at the earliest stages of development, that is.

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As individuals, paranoia is often a symptom of schizophrenia and other disorders, but many individuals who don't suffer from diagnosable disorders also easily succumb to paranoid conspiracy theories. When they gravitate toward others who share this tendency, together they reinforce their exaggerated and unfounded fears by becoming extremist groups. In fundamentalism, this is called apocalypticism, collectively exaggerating their fears to such an extreme that they believe the whole world is coming to an end.

This is why another characteristic of the fundamentalist mindset is charismatic leadership, though the leader is just as paranoid as everyone else. As stated in Charles Strozier's book on the subject, "The leaders exert a powerful influence by expressing ideas with assured, intense conviction. At the same time most charismatic leaders are psychologically paranoid, which is the source of the certainty with which they speak."<sup>6</sup> There's that rigidity playing out again, intellectual *rigor mortis*, ideological decay as the individuals involved gravitate toward groupthink.

This tendency to inflate our fears to paranoid or apocalyptic proportions, which becomes dangerous when enforced by groups, also gets projected outward, so the paranoid group obsesses about the danger and inherent evil of outsiders, which explains the demonization of liberals, the criminalization of black persons, the hatred and suspicion of Jews, or gays, or immigrants, or Muslims, and so on.

Of course, it's not just religious fundamentalists who give in to their fears to such extremes. Humans, by nature, are wired toward fear. It's a great survival mechanism, which is why liberals can as easily project our fears, and subsequent hostilities, onto others too: capitalists, billionaires, conservatives, republicans, white straight males, fundamentalists, and so on.

As all of this began to sink in about the same time I was arriving as your minister, it caused me to consider how much I engaged in such thinking: how often I exaggerated my own fears and projected them onto others. The problem with projecting what's really inside us onto others is then we can't see who they really are. It's extremely disrespectful. Remember, *respect* has the root meaning "to see," which is what respecting someone is, seeing them for who they truly are, beneath the surface of our projections, first impressions, and prejudices. When we take a superficial look at someone who is wealthy, or conservative, or male, or whatever, and think we've seen all we need to know, then we aren't seeing reality, we're projecting a delusion, and violating our first principle in the process, *respecting the worth and dignity of every person*.

This point hit home for me several years ago, when I was among a group from the Spokane Alliance who had been invited to our previous Mayor's office to discuss what we thought were our concerns about his proposed budget. It turns out he was extremely upset about what some of us had said about him while testifying during a recent City Council meeting on the same matter. He was even prepared to play video of our remarks, though he decided not

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<sup>6</sup> See, "The Charismatic Leader and the Totalism of Conversion," Charles B. Strozier, Katherine Boyd, James W. Jones, *The Fundamentalist Mindset*, *ibid.*, p. 38.

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to. I couldn't exactly recall what I had said but could tell he took whatever was bothering him very personally and even remarked about how painful it had been for his spouse to hear such things said about her husband.

In that moment, I felt such empathy for him, and some guilt, that I vowed to do my best to make sure my public remarks about others aren't personal, that I state my honest disagreements, but do so in a way that doesn't violate our first UU principle requiring us to respect, that is, to see the humanity and worth of others. It's not been easy, especially with "you know who" in the White House. But it is an aspiration and discipline worth striving for. So I try to remember, my projections are shallow and superficial lies that deceive me and hurt others.

Real people are complicated and multidimensional. It's my job to remember this and to know there's something much greater beneath the surface, even if I can't see it. This is why I don't participate in protests that are against people I disagree with who come to our community, like Rick Santorum, Condoleezza Rice, or even Donald Trump have in the past, although I do think I took a selfie in front of the Baby Trump balloon when it was here. Well, nobody's perfect.

Instead of protesting people, which our first principle discourages us against, I'm willing to counter demonstrate. To me, this means rather than protesting someone's presence, which is to deny their right to travel and speak, if not to exist, I should demonstrate how my values and ideas differ. So events meant to respond to the presence of those we disagree with shouldn't be about their presence among us. Banishing people, and forbidding the expression of their speech and ideas, is primitive and oppressive behavior. I should know, as someone who has just been excommunicated from the order of UU Ministers for writing a book. Instead, we should just speak for ourselves, uplifting our values and ways by demonstrating and stating why we believe they are better. This is precisely what we did when Rick Santorum came to town to speak against marriage equality many years ago. Instead of protesting his presence, at my urging, a group of faith leaders from our community originated the People of Faith Support Marriage Equality campaign, demonstrating our values instead, which proved extremely successful.

I was fortunate, a year or so after I arrived, to also stumble upon Peter Diamandis' and Stephen Kotler's new book, *Abundance: The Future is Better than You Think*, which contributed to my evolution by additionally showing me how my tendency toward fearfulness causes me to see things as much worse than they really are. They explain that we have difficulty being optimistic about the future because our brains are hardwired to see the negative, especially when coping with the unknown and uncertainty. Uncertainty about what's out there gets filtered through the amygdala, that part of our brains they remind us is, "responsible for primal emotions like rage, hate, and fear."<sup>7</sup> Yes, our brain actually has a special place for fear that's feeds directly into our emotional processor, the hippocampus. When it comes to questions of our survival, in particular, they say the amygdala "becomes

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<sup>7</sup> Diamandis, Peter H., & Kotler, Steven, *Abundance*, Free Press, New York, NY, 2012, p. 32.

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hypervigilant,”<sup>8</sup> and causes us to see things from a negative perspective that only fears the worst. We are neurologically hardwired to be afraid.

A short time later I discovered a relatively new area of evolutionary psychology called ETAS theory, backing this up. Evolutionary psychology considers human behavior in light of how it may have benefited our species’ survival. ETAS stands for Evolutionary Threat Assessment Systems. Cognitive therapist Paul Gilbert, succinctly explains that “the most important question faced everyday by all animals, including humans, is whether their immediate environment is dangerous or not.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, the first think we do in any situation is try to determine if we’re safe. New experiences and environments naturally make us feel a little anxious. Under normal circumstances we become calm once we’ve assessed the situation and determined there are no immediate threats. But those who have had a lot of insecurity in their lives can especially have trouble ever truly calming down. Living in a constant state of fear can lead to all kind of illnesses, in addition to a false and negative perception of the world.

Prior to this, a lot my ministry was based on such fear, on finding the evil enemy, even if it was only an evil ideology. As a philosopher, who was trained to ask questions, the main question beneath most my questions was, “what’s wrong with this?” It impacted how I saw the world and others, causing a degree of mistrust. After realizing how both my neurology and education have contributed to my negative perceptions, I worked to see past these biases and, I’m happy to say, have become a much more optimistic person about our future, and about human nature. Now I tend to see the innate goodness in human nature, rather than the pessimistic view there’s something essentially wrong with all of us because we are human. I don’t have a negative view of human nature.

It’s made my experience of life much richer and happier, even though I have noticed it hasn’t always been so well received by everyone in my liberal community. People especially enjoy hearing sermons about how we’re right and others are wrong. We like knowing what the dangers are out there so we can avoid them. And we like feeling superior and heroic. We enjoy seeing ourselves as the good guys. So sermons pointing out what’s wrong with the world and with others meet a lot of psychological needs when it comes to coping with our amygdala driven fears and tendencies toward suspicion, paranoia, and groupthink. Everyone being on the same page, and having a common enemy, and an ideology that can fix it all, makes us feel like we are in control and, thus, safe. My sermons don’t facilitate this as much as they used to.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Flannelly, Kevin J., and Galek, Kathleen, *Religion, Evolution, and Mental Health: Attachment Theory and ETAS Theory*, **Journal of Religion and Health** (2010) 49-337-350, Published online, March 17, 2009, Springer Science & Business Media, LLC, 2009, p. 340.

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All of this has synthesized another change in my development: I no longer consider myself a dragon slayer. What I mean by this is that I'm no longer on a psychological hero's journey. As a younger man, I was keen on figuring out what's wrong with the world and fixing its problems, ideologically speaking. In a chaotic world, full of evils, it made me feel good about myself. Of course, part of being young is about being idealistic. We want to figure things out for ourselves, to solve the world's problems, to find the surest way to live, and to see ourselves as the heroes of our emerging story. The problem is, being a hero means slaying an enemy, or toppling a giant, even if, in reality, like delusional Don Quixote, we are only tilting at windmills. Worse, sometimes the windmills we attack are real people far more complicated than our paranoid projections.

When I get in such a mood, I try to think of all the youthful idealists who greeted their young counterparts returning from Vietnam by shouting at and spitting on them. Their rage against the war was projected onto other children who had been forcibly taken from their homes and placed in a dangerous foreign country where they had to kill or be killed. Those kids couldn't wait to get home, and were lucky if they did, only to be the receptacles of collective outrage. My guess is that a lot of those understandably outraged young idealists grew to regret targeting these returning soldiers. My hope is to have fewer such regrets in my future by not tilting at real people I mistake for windmills. So I'm off the hero's journey and am no longer in the dragon slaying business.

This doesn't mean I don't still fight my battles. I do, just not as I have in the past. As much as I've evolved, my values haven't changed much. I still believe deeply in reason, freedom of conscience, and the humanistic ethic that seeks human welfare and individual unfolding for everyone, which is why I chose Unitarian Universalism as my religion. My ethics have evolved only inasmuch as I have become more devoted to these principles. In the past, I considered myself more of an ethical consequentialist, meaning I determined right and wrong based on their outcomes, not their means. Sticking just to the means often hurts a lot of people in the end, which is why civil disobedience is sometimes necessary. But nowadays I'm more value driven. Influenced by stoicism, I agree that our values must be lived out in every situation, regardless of the consequences to our own lives, whether others appreciate what we do, or hate it. The stoics tell us all else is indifferent, including pain and pleasure.

So I remain devoted to reason, that is, to basing my beliefs on empirical evidence and facts, then using reason as best I can to objectively interpret their meaning. And to freedom of conscience, by which I mean preserving the fundamental right of everyone, friend or foe, to speak their minds without fear of punishment or being demonized, and I will even stand against my own friends and peers to do so. Finally, the humanistic ethic, which, again, says the sole purpose of everything we do, socially and politically, must be for advancing human welfare and individual unfolding.

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So, yes, I've changes a lot over the years. Unless I choose death or, worse, becoming a zombie among the living dead, I really can't help myself. I'm not sure where the road ahead will lead from here, but I remain excited about all the possibilities before me and continuing to evolve and grow. How about you?