

Is This My Church?

A sermon by Rev. Fred Small
First Parish in Cambridge, Unitarian Universalist
October 30, 2011

Assembly Minutes, June 19, 1908

Mr. Grueber introduced the following to be discussed: Nine reasons not to introduce the typewriter into our church.

1. The paper must be put into the machine and aligned properly, tabs must be set. This is not easy. When writing by hand, one simply begins, exactly where you want with no restrictions.
2. With a typewriter, you have to constantly remember to capitalize and put in punctuation. It is easy to forget, and to go back and change things is hard. When writing by hand, such things are automatic.
3. With the typewriter, you have to have been trained to find the proper keys. This takes time. We already know how to write.
4. With the typewriter, you are limited to the size and spacing of the type. When writing by hand, you can use any size letters or style you want.
5. With the typewriter, centering and setting margins is [sic] not easy; when writing, it is no problem.
6. A typewriter breaks down and costs to be fixed. Writing does not.
7. Correcting a mistake after something has been typed is a problem; when writing by hand, it is not.
8. The church has gotten along for over 1900 years without a typewriter; why do we need this now?
9. Instead of learning a machine with all the above drawbacks, time should be spent on penmanship.

I love this!

Is it authentic? I have no idea.

The citation is to an essay by John Maxwell in an anthology titled *Leading in Times of Change*, published in 2001. Whether it's from the actual minutes of an actual church meeting in 1908, I cannot tell you.

But to me it has the ring of truth because it conveys so marvelously our nervousness about change, especially in church.

You know, we may not admit it, but I wonder if one of the reasons we come to church is to avoid change, to escape the inescapable change going on all around us in our homes, our schools, our workplaces, our communities, our country, our world. Even the climate is changing, which is truly weird. Can't church be a refuge from change?

Well, that's obviously a rhetorical question, because everybody knows that change is inevitable. We know that absence of change is the clinical definition of death. Yet how we struggle against it.

“We live,” observes Paula d’Arcy, “like people in the path of a hurricane or fire who refuse to evacuate, clinging to our familiar, well-worn versions of things and resisting what’s new. As a result, important life passages become costly to navigate, which is the very reason we want to avoid them. But in avoiding the passage, we avoid the growth and the deepening as well.”

First Parish in Cambridge is changing rapidly.

Our congregation is more diverse in our beliefs, ages, classes, colors, ethnicities, abilities, sexual orientations, and gender identities and expressions than at any time in our 375-year history. Our worship is more culturally varied, more emotionally demonstrative, and more spirit-filled. In social hour, it’s not unusual to hear congregants chatting in Spanish, Mandarin, or Haitian Creole.

Last month at our Homecoming worship, 345 people crowded into this sanctuary as African-American Nurudafina Pili Abena drummed the invocation, Irish-American Joe Foley played the trumpet fanfare, Colombian-American Associate Minister the Reverend Lilia Cuervo offered the prayer, queer Vietnamese-American Ministerial Intern Elizabeth Nguyen invited the offering, and Anglo-American Senior Minister yours truly welcomed newcomers in Spanish and English and led the congregation in an African-American-gospel-style hymn composed by Mimi Bornstein, a Unitarian Universalist with Jewish roots, during the singing of which people actually held hands.

After the service, Elizabeth heard somebody ask, “Is this my church?”

Now, I don’t know if the question was posed in admiration, consternation, or simply bewilderment. But it’s a natural and an important question.

“Is this my church?”

Of course it is! Of course it’s your church.

If you’re here to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person, this is your church.

If you’re here to support justice, equity, and compassion in human relations, this is your church.

If you’re here for spiritual growth, this is your church.

If you’re here to connect with the interdependent web of all existence, this is your church.

If you’re here for what James Luther Adams called intimacy and ultimacy, this is your church.

If you’re here to stand on the side of love, this is your church.

This will always be your church.

What we stand for doesn’t change. What we love ultimately doesn’t change.

Who we are changes all the time. Thank God!

A couple of days ago I was speaking with a longtime First Parish member who remembers with fondness how things used to be. But he and his wife still attend regularly. “You know,” he said, “worship now is quite different. But I think the values haven’t changed.”

This will always be your church.

But in another sense, maybe a more profound sense, this has never been your church. Nor mine.

Because it doesn’t belong to you. It doesn’t belong to me. It belongs to anyone and everyone who needs it.

It belongs to every person of whatever color or class or culture who finds their way here, some of them lonely, some struggling, some in despair, people yearning for sacredness without sanctimony, for devotion without dogma, for spiritual nurture or community service or justice-making without surrendering either the freedom or the responsibility to make up their own minds.

A church is not the property of the members in the pews. It belongs equally to the larger congregation of souls who will enter its doors for the first time next Sunday and next month and next year and next decade and next century.

We honor antiquity but we belong to posterity.

Authentic hospitality means a profound openness to possibility, an understanding that growth never happens, cannot happen, without change. Having started something, we must be, as the hymn charges us, “willing to be changed by what we’ve started.”

Ultimately we belong to that larger purpose and higher aspiration and deeper wisdom that some of us call spirit and others call God. Whatever language we use, the question we should be asking ourselves is not “What is my comfort level?” but rather “What is the breadth of our vision? What is the power of our devotion? Who are we called to become?”

To answer those questions with integrity and courage demands that we remain radically open to possibilities heretofore unimagined, that we resist with disciplined determination any ossification of our expectations, any facile embrace of familiarity masquerading as tradition.

Tradition is precious. I was raised high Episcopalian, and today I consider myself a high Unitarian Universalist. I love tradition. I love ritual and repetition and the comfort of the known. But tradition, however cherished, is not an ultimate value. It is an instrument of our faithfulness to our deepest values and highest purpose. Tradition must be balanced by innovation, or the institution sickens and dies.

We are on a journey into a multiracial, multicultural, justice-making future. It’s a vision this congregation contemplated for years and has now undertaken in earnest. We still have a long way to go, but we are on the path.

In 2008 the congregation retained the JUUST Change Consultancy to help us get started. In 2009 the congregation joined the Diversity of Ministry Initiative and in just three weeks raised an astonishing \$175,000 to fund its vision. In 2010 the congregation called the Reverend Lilia Cuervo, the first Latina settled minister in our history.

Last spring, the congregation approved a new mission statement declaring the intention “to create a multicultural, spirit-filled community that works for justice, fosters spiritual curiosity and faith formation, shares joy, heals brokenness, and celebrates the sacred in all.” In our mission statement, we specifically “welcome people of all beliefs, ages, classes, colors, ethnicities, abilities, sexual orientations, and gender identities and expressions.”

Three years ago, in my sermon “Building the Beloved Community,” I cited seven well-established principles for creating a multiracial, multicultural congregation.

First was intentionality. We have made our intention explicit.

Second was diversity of leadership. Our leadership is more diverse than ever.

Third was inclusive worship embodying a variety of styles and tradition. Our worship is more inclusive and varied than ever.

Fourth was location. (That hasn't changed!) We are blessed with a central, accessible location in a highly diverse city.

Fifth was consistent outreach to the surrounding community with meaningful ministries. We are reaching out more effectively than ever.

Sixth was adaptability. "We have to be willing," I said, "to examine our old ways of doing things and see if they still serve us and the diverse congregation we seek. We have to be willing to change—not our values, not our principles, not our spirituality—but our habits and prejudices. To be open to new people, we have to be willing to learn from them." We are becoming more adaptable, but this is a continuing spiritual practice.

Seventh, diversity must be part of a larger mission. Our mission statement makes clear our larger purposes of spiritual growth, healing, and justice.

As we have made significant strides in realizing these principles, we have seen unmistakable growth in the diversity of our congregation—in the pews, in our membership, and in our leadership.

We asked for change. We committed to change. We worked for change. We are changing.

Be careful what you pray for.

Change is disorienting. Change is stressful. Change is challenging.

Change is the life blood of every living being.

"When in the midst of great change," poet Mark Nepo advises,

it is helpful to remember how a chick is born. From the view of the chick, it is a terrifying struggle. Confined and curled in a dark shell, half-formed, the chick eats all its food and stretches to the contours of its shell. It begins to feel hungry and cramped. Eventually, the chick begins to starve and feels suffocated by the ever-shrinking space of its world.

Finally, its own growth begins to crack the shell, and the world as the chick knows it is coming to an end. Its sky is falling. As the chick wriggles through the cracks, it begins to eat its shell. In that moment – growing but fragile, starving and cramped, its world breaking – the chick must feel like it is dying. Yet once everything it has relied on falls away, the chick is born. It doesn't die, but falls into the world.

. . . Transformation always involves the falling away of things we have relied on, and we are left with a feeling that the world as we know it is coming to an end, because it is.

Yet the chick offers us the wisdom that the way to be born while still alive is to eat our own shell. When faced with great change – in self, in relationship, in our sense of calling – we somehow must take in all that has enclosed us, nurtured us, incubated us, so when the new life is upon us, the old is within us.

I've spoken before about Paula D'Arcy, who at 27 lost her husband and daughter in an automobile accident. She writes:

The forms of things are always changing. Trees wither and drop their needles and die, people move in and out of our lives, fire and flood destroy property. Yet within each event, within every season, within the relationships that change and

prove themselves to be impermanent, within the birthing and dying, and after a million things take form and then drop away—still, that which brings life into being, the unchangeable presence called God, is there. . . . The unchanging spirit is like a flower rising up from the secrecy of a small seed. One spirit, one heart. But only those who make peace with change will glimpse it.

One spirit. One heart.
May we make peace with change, and find peace within change.
Amen and Blessed Be.

Benediction by Mark Nepo

Often as we are being transformed, we cannot tell what is happening. For while in the midst of staying afloat, it is next to impossible to see the ocean we are being carried into. . . . As the days rinse our heart, we can feel something unseeable scour us through, though we can't yet imagine how much fresher milk and sky and laughter will taste once we are returned to the feel of being new.