

Change We Can Believe In
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Opening Words – (#602 Singing the Living Tradition, Lao-Tse)

If there is to be peace in the world,
There must be peace in the nations.
If there is to be peace in the nations,
There must be peace in the cities.
If there is to be peace in the cities,
There must be peace between neighbors.
If there is to be peace between neighbors,
There must be peace in the home.
If there is to be peace in the home,
There must be peace in the heart.

Readings

1. From [*The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War*](#) by Elisabeth Sifton (pg. 316):

Realism...meant being aware of inevitable human failing, whether in domestic affairs or in foreign policy. Nations, like all communities like any church or political gathering, cannot presume an absolute claim on truth, rectitude, virtue, force, or power. Democratic debate—discussion, dispute, inquiry—was an essential component in the formulation of policies and plans...for democracy's leaders must always take account of the contingent human errors that will inevitably alter what we do. Open, tolerant, engaged respect for the differences among us is essential. There is no freedom without it.

2. From [*President Obama's Inaugural Address*](#):

Our challenges may be new. The instruments with which we meet them may be new. But those values upon which our success depends — hard work and honesty, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism — these things are old. These things are true. They have been the quiet force of progress throughout our history. What is demanded then is a return to these truths. What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility — a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation, and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task.

Sermon

The Buddhist says to the hot dog vendor, “Can you make me one with everything?”

You may have only heard that much of the story...there's more. The vendor seems to ignore the playful double entendre of the request, and proceeds to load a hot dog with onions and relish and ketchup and mustard and sauerkraut—everything!—and hands it to the Buddhist. The Buddhist then hands the vendor a \$20. And he waits.

As he has spent a lifetime practicing meditation he is pretty good at waiting patiently and calmly, but the hot dog vendor now seems to be totally oblivious of his presence. So finally the Buddhist, restraining his irritation as best he can, breathes deeply and asks: “Excuse me, but don’t I get some change?”

And the vendor replies, “Ah, change must come from within.”

Change must come from within.

If we condense Lao Tzu’s sequence of events in the Reading, you must have peace in the heart to have peace in the world, and if peace does not start there then the whole thing crumbles like a proverbial house of cards. Mahatma Gandhi said, *Be the change* you wish to see. Change—resounds the chorus of prophetic and profound voices, including the clever hot dog vendor—change must come from within.

And that, for me, is something of a frightening prospect. The world needs changing and if it has to wait for *me* to change, we might be in some trouble. And yet, if the change that we seek is not securely anchored in the depths of our individual souls, where will this change lead us? What can we expect?

The “change” that is in the air; the “change” that lies at the heart of the excitement that we saw in the nearly unimaginable crowds at the inauguration of Barak Obama; the “change” that has caused some of us to believe that this society, rather than provoking us to respond thoughtlessly from our fears, can inspire us by reflecting our most deeply-held values ...we have to know that this “change” will be seized and packaged and used in all sort of ways: to make money, to maneuver political benefit, to manipulate public opinion, to convince, to obscure, to defeat, to sell...

Shepard Fairey, creator of the famous Obama Hope poster, [has been hired by Saks Fifth Avenue](#) to create a whole new campaign for them based on Soviet propaganda posters (I kid you not!) with the theme: “Want it!” Pepsi, whose logo bears striking similarities to the Obama campaign’s logo, [is asking people to post videos to their site](#) lending their suggestions to President-elect Obama on how he might “refresh America.” Hundreds of articles have gone to print talking about the “Obama-branding,” analyzing marketing techniques, logo designs, and even font choices that helped to “sell” the message and the man to the American people.

And I’m not saying this from any moral indignation about the advertising industry. I’m not saying this to promote some naïve dream about purifying political campaigns of corporate influence and the savage dictates of a market economy. I’m not saying this to accuse anyone of selling out. I’m not even saying, “Isn’t this terrible that this happens?” It is happening. It will happen. I say it only so that we can raise our awareness, and so we can separate *Change: the Slogan*, *Change: the Logo*; *Change: the Advertisement*—separate all of those from the *change we can believe in*.

And much more insidious than any transparent marketing campaign is the way that some are trying to package and sell the *appearance* of change to avoid talking about the *substance* of change. There are those--those who have a stake in the system as we have known it--who would love to see the inaugural celebration as a *closing celebration* of a movement. “Here you go; this is the change you wanted; now go home and let us take care of things from here.” I think that we should pay heed to the words of President Obama himself:

This victory alone is not the change we seek. It is only the chance for us to make that change. And that cannot happen if we go back to the way things were.

This is not the end of our work. This is the *opportunity* for work, meaningful work that may help to change things. And that cannot happen if we go back to the way things were. And that cannot happen if we don't make our voices heard. And that cannot happen if we imagine that change is now on auto-pilot.

There was an interesting exchange in a discussion on [Bill Moyers Journal this last Friday](#) evening. Melissa Harris-Lacewell, Associate Professor of Politics and African American Studies at Princeton University, said that she had been investigating the meaning of the Martin Luther King holiday in the new Obama era, and she had a photograph of President Lyndon Johnson with Martin Luther King, Jr., that she would show to people and ask them: if they could superimpose Barak Obama's face on this picture, where would it go? Many people answered, "Oh, well, King" and she would say, "No, no, no...Barak Obama's LBJ in this picture. We've elected him to the U.S. presidency.

"So the missing image is who will play the role of King?" she told Myers, "Because, in fact, the president needs Kings. I actually think it's plural. It's not a single King."

And Moyers replies, "You mean they need agitators out there...who are pressing them to do the right thing. As Lyndon Johnson said to Martin Luther King — go out there and make it possible for me to do the right thing."

"Exactly," she said. Exactly.

They—our leaders—they need agitators out there who are pressing them to do the right thing. More than our approval or disapproval in the latest poll, our leaders need our help and our insistence on what is right and our commitment to holding them (and ourselves) accountable.

And that cannot happen if we go back to the way things were.

The way things were. The way things are. That's just the way it is. Some things will never change. Because now we see cracks in the wall of what is. Things that never change are changing. It is not pretty, nor simple, nor the way we might have chosen, but it is real.

That we are in the midst of crisis is now well understood, said President Obama in his Inaugural Address, and he proceeded to tick off a list that hardly seemed designed to give one hope: *Our nation is at war...Our economy is badly weakened...Homes have been lost; jobs shed; businesses shuttered. Our health care is too costly; our schools fail too many; and each day brings further evidence that the ways we use energy strengthen our adversaries and threaten our planet.*

And I think of the prayer from Reinhold Niebuhr:

God grant us the grace to
Accept with serenity that which we cannot change
The courage to change what should be changed
And the wisdom to distinguish one from another.

One of the greatest obstacles to constructive change is our own certainty about what we cannot change, which is why a time of great upheaval like the one in which we find ourselves provides an opportune time to revisit those questions.

I love this prayer, the Serenity Prayer, but I'd like to rename it, for today at least, as The Change Prayer. Serenity is one piece of it, but the theme that carries throughout is *change*.

I believe that, as Unitarian Universalists, we have much to offer to this discussion about change. In a certain respect, we have created a religion that is characterized by change and we have a responsibility to clarify and defend its contours. We are creed-less; we have no unchangeable statement of belief; we leave space so that our vision can extend beyond the limitations of the present; we explicitly open ourselves to challenges that we cannot now foresee. Universalist minister, L.B. Fisher, addressing where Universalists *stood* on particular issues, famously said, "The only true answer to give to this question is we don't stand at all; we move." But what guides our movement?

That's what the Pope wants to know. Pope Benedict, though he has been criticized for making attacks on Islam and many other groups, has one major target in terms of his religious philosophy: *relativism*. In case you didn't know, we are included in that attack. Not having a firm creed to stand upon, he would say, we are left exposed to the winds of change and end up with a self-serving, "anything goes" philosophy that cannot nurture the spirit nor create positive change in the world.

I think that we should take his criticism seriously. I'm not saying that we should accept it, but treat it as a healthy warning. And think about how we might respond.

If we have opened ourselves to change, it is not simply change for the sake of change. We do not open ourselves to change so that we can garner approval from the powers that be; it is not so that we can strike the proper contemporary pose. We do not open ourselves to change so that we can conform to the prevailing culture, but so that our prophetic voice can speak clearly *to* that culture and work to transform that culture. We do not open ourselves to change so that we can avoid commitment to anything in particular, but so that we can commit ourselves more directly to the moral struggles of today.

We explicitly open ourselves to the possibility of change, even opening our Principles and Sources to the possibility of revision, because we know that no single formulation or understanding or articulation of our purpose will serve for all times and places. We explicitly open ourselves to the possibility of change because we are "aware of inevitable human failing." We explicitly open ourselves to the possibility of change because we "cannot presume an absolute claim on truth, rectitude, virtue, force, or power." We explicitly open ourselves to the possibility of change because we "must always take account of the contingent human errors that will inevitably alter what we do." We explicitly open ourselves to the possibility of change because our commitment to the burning core at the heart of our mission in the liberal religious tradition--which is to discover and share more love, justice, peace--that commitment does *not* change. The purpose means far more than the proclamation and we can't let the purpose be hindered because we have fallen in love with our present understanding of how it may be achieved. We open ourselves to the possibility of change because we realize that the changes that we nurture within ourselves are part of an ongoing and ever-renewing process and practice, while the changes that we seek to effect in the wider world are part of an ongoing responsibility that calls for constant reexamination.

And though it may be true that change must come from within, we don't have the luxury of working on one change at a time. If the change we work towards in society must first be born within, it is also true that the change born within us must find expression in our society. The English economic historian, R. H. Tawney wrote: "Obviously religion is a 'thing of the Spirit.' But the social order is also a thing of the spirit. The forms of economic organization which a society establishes, the property rights which it maintains, the relations between its members which it sanctions—these things...reflect its scale of moral preferences."

What if we claimed the power of this tentatively-renamed Change Prayer and pledged ourselves to change what should—what must—be changed? What if we took up the call to a new era of responsibility "firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task."

We may find ourselves building a land where justice shall roll down like waters and peace like an ever-flowing stream. We may find that this old world can be a garden. We may find ourselves building for tomorrow a nobler world than we have known today.

We may find ourselves participating in that which we would not have previously believed possible...not just change, but change we can believe in.