

# Glasgow Unitarians

13 July 2014

Rev John Clifford

**OPENING THOUGHT:** Bertold Brecht “Change”

**READING:** Khalil Gibran The Prophet “Children”

**REFLECTIONS on “Change”**

1. John Clifford

The word, “Change” has been on my mind a lot recently - in fact, it is one of the abiding themes in my personal reflections and has been for decades. Recently it has been linked with reflections about the different ways people experience and anticipate change, e.g. while we Unitarians take a pretty relaxed view about women in leadership positions, be it in church or in society, there are those for whom this is definitely not true. Evolution and revolution are both processes of change and while some would view the vote in the Church of England tomorrow as a natural, if overly-late, evolution in their church development, a significant part of the Church of England see it as revolutionary and linked to other social changes which they oppose. So I suppose that one difference between evolution and revolution is not just about the speed of change but how it is linked with other changes going on. If everything is changing rapidly it is harder to feel the stability that gives us a sense of security in the future.

Of course, as Unitarians, we have an attitude to change which differs enormously from most religious groups. Most religions develop in order to pass down the past relatively unchanged from one generation to the next and the most bitter of arguments can be about small changes that creep in like thieves in the night to compromise the purity of the product. Loose communities form around particular individuals or schools of thought and gradually these realise that the original impulse that defines them will be lost if it is not held on to, if it is not codified, if it is not perpetuated by an authoritative subgroup charged with this responsibility. This may mean a strong and rigid priesthood such as in the Catholic Church or the Egyptian priests who held sway for 3000 years or it may take the form of guru-disciple patterns where one gets to be a guru by being authorised after studying under an accepted guru, but some recognized authority is responsible for transmitting the heritage of values. Differences between gurus or between churches can be accommodated by having different Schools or Orders, but often differences become threatening to the purity of the message and even to the authorities.

But our sense of heritage is different. We were one of the religious communities who welcomed the insights of science when Darwin came along in the 19th C. We accepted the possibilities and implications of the evolutionary view. We believe, as our previous generations liked to say, that Revelation is not sealed - that is, that the experiences of the current generation are part of what is passed on. More than this, we say that we are in fact obligated to be part of this process, not only to be open to new truth but to seek it out, to test it, and if it proves reliable, to live it, to share it, to value it. Our first hymn, from the 18th C Shaker community expresses is as “turning” - we turn and change our perspective until it feels “just right”.

Some would seek the new with complete allegiance and abandon the old as inconsequential or quaint or old-fashioned or even retarded development which has been superseded. I think that, as usual, Khalil Gibran gets it just about right. In his passage on children he points out that the future belongs to our children but that doesn't mean that the current generation is value-less for we are the foundation for progress, we are the bow that is stable so that the arrow can reach its target.

My 5 year old grandson, Riley, is going through one of those phases that children are prone to - he is completely wrapped up in super heroes that change, i.e. transform from one thing to another - for instance from a car to a humanoid robot. We had this in a less mechanical way when I was a child reading Marvel comics under the covers at night: characters whose amazing abilities magically appeared along with a colourful costume when magic words or rituals were performed. The ordinary is transformed into the extraordinary and the goodies battle the baddies at a new level of conflict with much enhanced dangers and rewards. In my childhood it was the destruction of a city or in extreme cases the world but today's transformer heroes battle to save the galaxy or even the whole universe from destruction or evil domination.

To live with any kind of quality means to live with change. The question is what changes and how do we decide. Here in Scotland we are facing a crucial public vote about the future of our country. To start with, it is important that it is being settled by voting rather than battles. There may well be goodies and baddies in our society but they don't divide neatly into those for or against "Independence" and a properly informed decision by those affected is the right way to go. We have learnt something about resolving disputes without destroying communities that might, just might, be an inspiration and example for other parts of the world facing uncertain futures. I'm sure that in this congregation there will be members who support "Independence" and those who oppose it. Whatever the result of the vote in 2 months' time, and whichever position we take as individuals, we will be better able to maintain our sense of community because we are not going out with knives and lead pipes to settle the issue. Our fellow voters are our neighbours.

But this Referendum is not the only major change facing us. From our rapid transition to a technological future where real privacy is no longer possible; to the economic partnerships of big business and small secretive courts that will put democratic decisions under threat; to the democratisation of war where civilians are the main targets and activists the main defenders; to the centralisation of power of all sorts, be it wealth, media control, utilities, natural resources, or even the ability to travel, we are handing the future to our children with a narrowing range of options for change.

At some point the oppression of the Group confronts the Integrity of its members in a way that has to change or the Group itself will lose its integrity. And this is where our Unitarian faith has a message: Amidst all the changes of life, the enduring constant is change itself; our integrity is not like that of a billiard ball, unchanging until its final destruction; our integrity is in fact tied to our ability to balance an enduring vision with an openness to being changed. Those whose God is never changing and whose Laws are never changing have built their lives on Rocks that will eventually crumble.

Almost everyone, and I include myself here, gets less flexible and more stuck in their ways as they get older. Our values are mainly ones we learnt in our youth and we have spent decades trying to live. Our perceptions and ability to take more information decrease and slow down. Our cumulative experience can overwhelm new experiences

just through sheer percentages - that is, each new experience is a smaller percentage of our overall experience as we get older. With luck, some of this experience is distilled into “wisdom”, i.e. generally useful guidelines that help develop a sense of direction in a chaotic world. But in both secular and religious communities, power accumulates with years. And we know that the Archer loves the bow that is stable.....

But ultimately, it is the arrows that reach the future. The next generation must be at the centre of decision-making. Does this mean reserved places at the table for the young? I don't know. It probably depends more on how they are involved in the decisions that where they sit, but there is an argument for building in changes so no one person or group gets so entrenched that new voices cannot be heard and be effective.

So I've introduced women bishops, evolution, the Referendum, conflict resolution, even the idea of reserved places at the table for youth. What do YOU reckon is the best way we can align our voices and visions in ways that do not stifle change?

**CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSES** about six responses were made from the congregation before the focus was brought back to our worship and the singing of our final hymn.