

“If You Fear Change – Leave It Here”
Sermon delivered August 11, 2013 by Gini Johnson

As a young woman in the 60's, I was blown away by Rachel Carson's prophetic book, *Silent Spring*. Somehow, I completely missed the 1969 Pulitzer Prize winner for non-fiction “*So Human An Animal*” by Rene Debos, which explored in depth how we are shaped by surroundings and events as well as genetics. In addition to being a brilliant microbiologist with many important discoveries, in his later years Debos developed an ecologically based humanistic philosophy. When I recently read “*So Human An Animal*” I particularly liked this quote: “The quality of life depends **above all** on the quality of man's relationship to the rest of creation: to the winds and stars, to the flowers and the beasts, to smiling and weeping humanity.”

I will confess that I much prefer to relate to nature and smiling humanity rather than to weeping humanity. In fact, I vigorously try to avoid the weeping. Today, I'm going to tell you about my three Richards, and why every time one of them surfaces in my consciousness, I tell myself “enuf, already”. The grieving process does seem intended to be lengthy, but it isn't for a lifetime, OR IS IT? Do we continue to learn our important lessons from grief?

Let me explain that I'm telling you about the 3 Richards not to be morbid nor because they are the only losses I've experienced, but because they exemplify three types of losses: the gradual and familial, the unexpected and the sudden, inexplicable, which have deeply affected me. My hope is that each of you will recall your own “3 Richards” and discern what weeping, even if silent and internal, is still trying to teach you about change and loss and all that “good stuff” we often try to push away. Today, I'm really talking about relationships and the effects of change!

The 1st Richard, my big brother whom I'm adored as a child, is alive but lost to any meaningful relationship due to alcoholism. The disease began its insidious destruction on him at about the age of 16. As a teenager, he never saw where the good times would end. Now, at age 80 it is quite amazing that he is still alive – if one can call living in an advanced alcoholic fog, “alive”. We occasionally exchange stilted phone calls or e-mails, that is all. The wounds of severed connection with a family member are often gradual and usually lasting. I know there is nothing I can do but to “let go” of any expectations and accept what is. Letting go is difficult – I should be ordering the universe. It should change to meet my needs and wants!

Coincidentally, my other 2 sibling are also largely absent from my life which increases my gratitude for this loving community. But I digress.

The 2nd Richard and I worked together in a rehabilitation center for injured workers in the 1980s. We became good friends and connected at a spiritual level, even though he was a traditional Christian and I was anything but. The center closed, our lives moved on in different directions, my work was in another adjoining state and - we lost touch. One day I received a call from another friend who asked “have you heard about Richard? He explained that Richard had gone to the doctor with ongoing flu like symptoms, been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, given about 2 months to live, and was now in the hospital in bad shape. Richard had asked him to call me and see if I could come visit before he died. So, my next day off I drove the 150 miles to see Richard, thinking “such a little distance” why did we lose touch and now have to re-connect in this way? It was a bittersweet reunion with soft singing of recalled hymns, reading of psalms, reciting the Lord's prayer together and then crying goodbyes. All the way home I thought the same thing “how did we lose touch and then re-connect in this way?” And, why? 4 days later, Richard died. I was grateful that we had that time together and closure on our spiritual connection.

I continue to find it challenging to maintain connection with those who are important to me. Why? Perhaps carelessness, perhaps inattention, perhaps laziness? Perhaps we have to periodically winnow out some active relationships in order to keep our lives manageable? If so, can we do it with more clarity and loving intention?

The 3rd Richard and I also worked together, although he lived way out in Hartford, Ct, and I was living in Portland, Or. We were in a group of specialists from around the country who worked for a consulting firm. The year was 2001 and we had just finished a project for the State of Washington and begun one for AT&T. To tell the truth, I was a bit frustrated with Richard because, as project manager, I'd set tight deadlines which he didn't always meet. Imagine!

The morning of September 11th, I was in a Seattle hotel room preparing to work with another colleague evaluating vendor proposals. I'd risen extra early so I could exercise and shower before she arrived. Drinking my coffee, I switched on the TV and watched an incomprehensible horror unfold: planes flying into the tower of my company's headquarters, fiery billowing destruction, people, some holding hands, plummeting to their deaths, setting off unspeakable dread and fear and creating terrifying vivid memories.

Every one of my 295 colleagues in the tower's office perished, including two friends who had appointments there that day. One was Richard, whose family had not known he had an appointment in the city. He left 3 sons and a precious wife, who within days wrote an oped in the Hartford Courant. She pleaded with people to not do any ugly acts or retaliation killing. She was clear that we should not dishonor all that was good about this country and that Richard would not want that. Her moving letter was shared with all of us, as was a memorial service that was simultaneously broadcasted in movie theatres across the county so we could mourn together.

Sweet Richard missed seeing his 6 grandchildren grow up, extended family gatherings at the family home and, of course, being harassed by his impatient team leader for late submissions. Oh, how I disliked and dislike my judgmental self! A good fellow UUr in this church, who may go unnamed, often says "I'm so glad I don't have to judge anyone today" Right, Walter?

How I would love to be able to look into Richard's eyes and tell him how very much he met to me and everyone and how very much he was loved. That opportunity will likely never come but others will! I hope I seize them before it is too late!!

I've only begun to learn my lessons from grieving and I'm an old woman. I'm still not good at "letting go", maintaining connections and being non-judgmental. I don't tell folks how much I love them or how much they mean to me as often as I could.

Nevertheless, I want to suggest something today. It can seem overwhelming to cope with the rapid changes in our world – there is barely time to process one change or grieve a loss before the next one occurs. We can experience a growing sense of impotency in the face of global warming and ecological disasters, endless wars, corporate cannibalism and stalemated government. Some people suffer from paralyzing fears, ranging from financial to personal safety, that are further fueled by the media and government. Perhaps 'if you fear change, leave it here' is not only a catchy slogan but a healthy approach to life and a way to strengthen our beloved community.

Now, I don't think I'm a very fearful person. I do fear dying – not death – but dying and like everyone, want a quick inexpensive one for the sake of myself and family. However, I take risks! I've skydived, gone on safaris, up in a hot air balloon, traveled to foreign countries, changed careers many times and lived on both sides of the country. It could be that I just don't get it, lack common sense or have limited memory but whatever is underlying my zest for life – I like that part of myself!

I don't believe I would have any less pain and suffering by living in fear, dwelling on the past or worrying about tomorrow. It could be that I'm protected by limited memory. I recently read a quote by the modern Italian novelist, Italo Calvino: "Memory has to be strong enough to enable us to act without forgetting what we wanted to do, to learn without ceasing to be the same person, but it also has to be weak enough to allow us to keep moving into the future."

There is probably not much we can do about the acuteness of our memory or lack of same. As some of the rest of you can attest, the aging process does do a weird number on memory. However, I believe there are things we can do to help us not be paralyzed by fear, ruminate on the past or fret about the future. They are obvious, you know them: take care of yourself with exercise and healthy eating, develop a spiritual practice, spend time in nature, have loving relationships, and trust your heart, your soul, whatever you call it, more than your mind. For, as I read on a bumper sticker, it is dangerous to believe everything you think.

We have been asked to do lots of thinking about how we would like this church to be in the future and the qualities we desire in our next minister. While I don't fear the ultimate changes and look forward to this journey together, I do want to be the voice that cautions against turning the entire process into that uniquely UU approach, which is mostly intellectual, I/It based, rather than I/Thou or I/You which allows us to experience the holy in each and every one of us

In a handout in your order of service, you will find excerpts from "I and Thou" by Martin Buber and also an extended quote from "The Philosophy of Martin Buber" by Walter Kaumann, which you can read at your leisure, if interested.

In this time together, I want to express my agreement with the viewpoint that expansion of a purely analytic material view of existence devalues not only existents but the meaning of all existence. I-It relations are a barrier to deeper relations and community. I fervently hope that our transition process will enrich and expand our loving community, becoming the change we want to see in the world.

The little gifts on the table behind us are not just mementos of today's service, they also have a useful purpose. If you put your change in them daily and bring it to church on our sharing Sunday, they can be a fun way to increase your giving. Or, if you say nuts to giving, just put some nuts in them for fresh keeping. Either way, I'd ask that you take one per family or giving unit. If there are not enough today for everyone who wants one, please leave your name and e-mail address, and I'll get one to you in the near future.

Speaking of the future, I'll close by suggesting that at the end of life, you won't want a book in your hand. You will want a hand - a hand that has been loving and meaningful to you. Be that loving hand now and the future will take care of itself. You don't have to fear change. You can help the universe unfold as it will! Amen.

Excerpts from *I and Thou*
Martin Buber

"Three are the spheres in which the world of relation arises.

The first: life with nature. Here the relation vibrates in the dark and remains below language. The creatures stir across from us, but they are unable to come to us, and the You we say to them sticks to the threshold of language.

The second: life with men. Here the relation is manifest and enters language. We can give and receive the You.

The third: life with spiritual beings. Here the relation is wrapped in a cloud but reveals itself, it lacks but creates language. We hear no You and yet feel addressed; we answer-creating, thinking, acting: with our being we speak the basic word, unable to say You with our mouth.

But how can we incorporate into the world of the basic word what lies outside language? In every sphere, through everything that becomes present to us, we gaze toward the train of the eternal You; in each we perceive a breath of it; in every You we address the eternal You, in every sphere according to its manner.”

“Man can do justice to the relation to God that has been given to him only by actualizing God in the world in accordance with his ability and the measure of each day, daily. This is the only genuine guarantee of continuity. The genuine guarantee of duration is that the pure relation can be fulfilled as the beings become You, as they are elevated to the You, so that the holy basic word sounds through all of them. Thus the time of human life is formed into an abundance of actuality: and although human life cannot and ought not to overcome the It-relation, it then becomes so permeated by relation that this gains a radiant and penetrating constancy in it. The moments of supreme encounter are no mere flashes of lighting in the dark but like a rising moon in a clear starry night. And thus the genuine guarantee of spatial constancy consists in this, that man's relations to their true You, being radii that lead from all I-points to the center, create a circle. Not the periphery, not the community comes first, but the radii, the common relation to the center. That alone assures the genuine existence of a community.”

True community does not come into being because people have feelings for each other (though that is required, too) but rather on two accounts: all of them have to stand in a living, reciprocal relationship to a single living center, and they have to stand in a living, reciprocal relationship to one another.”

Comments in *The Philosophy of Martin Burber*
Walter Kaufmann (Translator of Burber)

“If one approaches I AND THOU as a philosophic essay trying to reconstruct an argument and testing that, it is not hard to criticize the book. But if instead of examining the book as an object, an IT, we open our hearts to it to hear what it has to say to us, we are confronted with a crucial question: If God is to mean something to us, can it be anything but what Burber suggests in this little book, namely *das ewige Du* (the eternal Thou)? All superstitions *about* God, all talk about him, all theology is sacrificed to the voice that speaks to us, the *Du* to which some cry out 'when', as Goethe says, 'man in his agony grows mute.' And not only in agony.”