

Old Wine, New Skins
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Paul had been blind for almost 30 years, but on this day, he sat down to a table in the lab enjoyed one of his favorite hobbies as he looked at an 8 of clubs. It wasn't that Paul had undergone an amazing surgery to repair his eyes, or that he had miraculously woken up to find this change. No, that day, Paul was seeing with his tongue.

This renewed vision came by way of research done by another Paul, the late Dr. Paul Bach-y-Rita, who began working in the 1960's on what he called "Sensory Substitution."

Here's what Dr. Bach-y-Rita had to say:

"We don't see with the eyes for example. We don't hear with the ears. All that goes on in the brain. Remember that...if I'm looking at you, the image of you doesn't get beyond my retina, just the back of my eye. From there to the brain, to the rest of the brain, its pulses...and those pulses aren't any different from the pulses in the big toe...if you can train the brain to extract that kind of information, then you don't need the eye to see..."¹

A set of cameras placed on his head translates visual imagery into signals that then runs to a device Paul keeps placed in the top of his tongue. Over time, his brain rewired itself, learned how to translate that information into visual information in his brain. Now, quite literally, Paul sees with his tongue.

For hundreds of years, Western society has proposed that much of our identity, our selves, is tied to what happens in our mental life. With advances in psychology and neuroscience, we've come to associate much of our personhood to what happens in our heads. And for many years, scientists believed that didn't change much. Now we can see that this center of our thoughts, of our perception of the world is adaptable, and that we can change it.

Change, in us, is possible after all.

¹ Bach-Y-Rita's words came from a 2004 interview it him played on the PBS Wired Science special, "Mixed Feelings." Original Air date 12-19-07. http://www.pbs.org/kcet/wiredscience/story/97-mixed_feelings.html

I began to think about what various religious teachers have been saying for centuries about such a transformation in the individual. I've heard them speak of a new life, of rebirth and enlightenment, awakening, of being "born again."

In the Christian New Testament, the books of Mark, Matthew, and Luke all include a similar parable from Jesus. In it he says this:

"...no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins."²

During the time of this parable, wine was kept inside animal skins. Old skins were hardened, and would break when new wine was put in and then fermented. While this story is usually interpreted as having to do with changing traditions, it seems like the image has something to offer for our spiritual growth as well.

New life comes at us fast. If we are not committed to transformation, to growth in our religious, physical, emotional lives, when this new life ferments, we might break. I think that even more often, it is a more subtle change. We keep putting the same experiences, etc into selves that we won't change, and then the wine just gets bitter.

But this teaching comes from nearly 2000 years ago. If we're going to talk of growth, of new learning, it seems we need a modern source. Well, I don't know about you, but when I need some good spiritual learning, I turn to Tom and Ray of NPR's show, Car Talk.

In September of 2007, Tom and Ray described a call they received in which a man had a horrific surprise. This man was an avid hunter, and one winter he decided to take one of his run down cars and use it for a deer bind on his property. All went well, and the next year, he returned to do the same thing. On a cold morning, he revved up the engine, turned on the heater, and sat back waiting for the car to warm. After a few moments, he heard a strange sound underneath his hood and his seats. In just a few seconds, he found out exactly what the sound was. In his absence, a den of snakes had made this car its home, and the heat had brought them out of hibernation. Needless to say, when snakes appeared from all corners, the man was gone.

² Mark 2:22 NRSV

Like the story from Jesus 2000 years ago about wineskins, this man experienced a similar truth. If we keep using the same old structure and the same old ways of being in a changing environment, we'll be in for an unpleasant surprise.

So what does this have to do with our community here? As Unitarian Universalists, it's not as often that you'll hear us speak of enlightenment or rebirth. The tradition we inherited from our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors affirms that humanity is not tainted by some original sin, and that no eternal punishment awaits us if we do not reach perfection. Even so, I don't know about you, but I still have a lot of room to grow.

We've been talking about evolution in this church a lot lately. In this system, apart from mutations, organisms don't tend to change or adapt, unless they have to, unless the environment around them is changing.

Well, you don't have to be a biologist or astronomer to see that the environment around us is changing. At our ministers' retreat in January, some of us heard a tape of a comedian said that if you don't believe in change, think that 500 million years ago, you couldn't go fishing.

The change that I am experiencing around me is happening much faster than that. The modes of communication through technology are changing the way humans interact with one another. We've got text messaging, emails, iPhones, blackberries. The church service we are sitting can be made available to anyone in the world as soon as we're finished. The world, the environment around us is changing so fast. To use the image of the parable, we have a lot of new wine coming in. I wonder if we as a community will be able to find a new skin that will handle it.

It is interesting to me to note that the way we gather in religious community, the way church is being done now is basically the same as it has been for over 500 years. The things you hear coming from Chuck and Kathleen in the pulpit are certainly different than what Martin Luther would've expected, but he would recognize the order of service.

People my age and the generations that come after us might be searching for fellowship, meaning, and justice, in a way that we would not recognize in twenty years. We will need a change.

Here, though, I think that the story of Unitarian Universalism is a hopeful one. In the history of religion, our members have been proud to call themselves heretics, as it

means on who is free to choose their path and their fate. I believe that our religious community, one that affirms there is always new truth to be found, that no one holds the answers alone, that all religious traditions, that science, psychology, religion, philosophy, all have insights to give us as we search for meaning – I believe that our tradition is uniquely suited to face new and challenging time, both as an organization, and as individuals.

Now, I can only speak for myself here, but when I first encountered Unitarian Universalism, I was overwhelmed that I had found a religious community that accepted me just as I was, and welcomed all people in to its walls. But I mistakenly assumed this meant that I would be in a community that would continually change to fit me, instead of challenging me to grow as well. I assumed that all the other things would change, so that I didn't have to.

In most of my work, I try and address the three themes of “I,” “We,” and “Thou.” For so many of us, the God of our childhood is not the same as we have today, if we even choose to use that language anymore. The “thou,” the source to which we look for meaning, has for most of us, adapted with our life experiences. Here and in other Unitarian Universalist churches, around 90% of us did not find this free faith until adulthood, and so our “we”, our community has changed over time as well. In my religious journey, I was quite ready to accept the change in “thou” and “we.” It was the change in the “I” part of the equation that I found more frightening.

Many years ago, I left churches that continually told me I was not good enough to deserve the love of their God, not without some major changes in me or without some sacrifice to make up for what a sinful person I was. When I finally got the courage to enter a religious community again, I was not ready for it to ask anything of me.

For a number of years, I fell into a classic mistake of religious liberals, which is to believe that I came to church, not to grow and expand my vision of what is true and good, but rather to be with likeminded people who were already getting it right. Anybody Else?

But as we can see right before our eyes, change is coming. There is new truth, new life, new wine as it were coming into this skin, and I want to be there changing with it when it happens.

What some of those religious teachers had been saying for so long is true. We do have the ability to radically change the people that we are. We can adapt our very

selves in the light of new vision, truth, and beauty. If Paul can see with his tongue, I can certainly get a new set of eyes myself every now and then.

But our ability to change extends into the world also. I am surprised at how often I hear from religious liberals that such a small religious minority can't make change in society, not with the landscape as it is.

I just don't think that is the case. Change is possible. On Wednesday, I came back home with the greatest feeling of optimism after our Live Oak men's lunch gathering. For the past few months, we have been studying Malcolm Gladwell's book, the Tipping Point, in which he asserts that outbreaks of social transformation come from identifiable, little changes.

Now, I know that I started here today talking about brain science, and now I'm introducing Gladwell's book. It may not sound a lot like religion, especially to any visitors we have here today, but let me tell you that what happened around the table that day was truly great religious dialogue.

We were on a chapter about the "Broken Window theory," the idea that small changes in an external environment can radically affect the actions and outlook of a population. And our guys went right to the Principles of Unitarian Universalism. Glenn McIntosh shared how contagious it would be if we treated every individual in our lives as our first principle would state, that each person has inherent worth and dignity. Gary Schuman immediately related the book to our seventh principle, affirming the interdependent web of creation, each part affecting the other. Gary compared this to a kaleidoscope, where when one small new piece comes into view, it changes the whole picture.

Our tradition of Unitarian Universalism is one that spans hundreds of years and has moved across the globe, but being a free faith, one without creeds, it means that its future is in our hands, in the insights, not of some teacher years ago, but in this room, in the children of our classrooms finding new ways to express their awe of the universe. I think that we have something very special to contribute in this time of great change.

This community is a safe place, one where all are welcomed. But any beloved community will ask something of us. A free faith asks that you commit to spiritual growth in community, a spiritual growth that does nothing less than make you more able to better the world. Not in some afterlife, not in the promise of souls, but in human experience now.

We have a hopeful future. Things don't have to be this way. We can be change, we can change ourselves. Doesn't mean its going to be easy – hard to see with the world with new eyes. Hard to shed that skin to let new life in. At least when animals do it, they are vulnerable during the in between time. And so are we. We have communities that not only encourage us to grow and change, but keep us safe during that time as well.

Let this be a place where we come, not only to be with people who are already getting it right, but to be transformed, to grow, to bring into ourselves a new vision of reality we could never image, that we can take this into the world. If our religion is to be anything, it will be measured in how we change people's lives, and nothing else. This happens here, right now, today, in coffee hour, when we leave, when we go home, how we talk to our friends, on the street, phone calls.

We can make people's lives better. I wonder when some of us stopped believing that our religious lives could radically change the lives of others. I'm excited about the possibility of living this kind of mindset every moment. I'm not there yet, but I hope to be, I hope you can help, and we can help each other to grow, into a new rebirth, a new life, not because we were sinful, or because we have to be something different than we are to have value, but because there is more love left to enter into our lives.

What better time than now?

Amen.