

Facing into the Wind
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix
Sunday, April 7, 2019
Rev. Margret A. O'Neill

How does the future arrive? Does it creep in silently when we are not paying attention? Does it blow in suddenly on a strong wind? Does it pounce like a stalking kitten? Is it like the unfolding of a rose, a change in the weather, the growing light of dawn, the flipping of a switch? Does the future emerge as a continuation and consequence of the past, or it is discontinuous, a sharp angle in the road? Do we create the future, or it is something that just happens to us?

I find wisdom in words from Rev. Angus MacLean, one of the great figures in the history of Unitarian Universalism:

*My father sent me up from the root cellar to see about the wind.
He was rechecking the winter's potatoes to remove all signs of rot and was
planning on setting out nets for some fresh cod later on.
Was there a steady breeze, he wanted to know.
Yes, there was.
"Now face it," he said, "so that the wind sings in both your ears.
Then tell me where your nose points to.*

*...What is it that's coming down the wind to meet us? We have decided to
make do with an orientation in this life, and all that lies between us and life's
exits calls for courage, thought, and imagination, and active concern...*

*... Anyway, let's keep the wind singing in both ears, and pray for the courage
to interpret and act upon what it brings to us.*

Angus MacLean was a Universalist, a professor of religious education, and dean of the Theological School at St. Lawrence University. Living from 1892 until 1969, he was witness to a time of immense change in the world, including two world wars and the social upheaval of the 1960s, and a time of transformative change in the Unitarian and Universalist faith traditions – including the creation of the newly consolidated UUA. His thought and work helped to shape the future as we live it today, especially in this faith tradition, and in the role of our congregations in the world.

If the future, like the weather, is taking shape somewhere over the horizon, borne in our direction on the wind, that means we can figure out where it is coming from and begin to learn something about it – by feeling, by sensing, by noticing which way we are facing when we can hear it singing in both our ears. If we can discern the origin and direction of that wind, then we can turn toward the future and scan the horizon for what is new, what is emerging or unfolding, what is flying on the breeze. We can face into the wind, face into the future, and so we are prepared to move forward, to move into the winds of change, embracing the future in whatever way we will.

My deep love, my call to ministry, is to journey with people through the changes in their lives, to journey with a community through changing times, to journey with a congregation as you navigate a season of change and pivot to face into the winds of the future. Though all the coming changes may not be evident when I first arrive as a transitional minister, it soon becomes clear that a change in ministerial leadership really is a pretty big deal, and it begins to become apparent that your future will not look exactly like the times that are behind you.

In a time of transition there are other, larger, changes that may become clearer – new arrivals, new generations, new social and environmental ecologies, new political realities. In changing times, new light shines on societal relationships, challenges and realities that may have been hidden from us, or that we may have been unwilling to see. So many changes, so much that is riding on the wind.

In all our lives there are liminal moments, moments when we are poised on a threshold, caught for an instant in that time between what is behind us and what is before us. It is the nature of life that we experience those threshold moments, and that we keep on moving forward, whatever that means, however it feels, because turning back is not really an option. In every moment we are in the present, a being, but within and around us, before us, the future is taking shape so that we are at once a being and a becoming. That is true for us individually in our own fragile and transforming lives, and it is true for the human communities that we create and sustain in our being and becoming.

Author William Bridges points out that change itself is an event, something physical, mechanical, something that happens. And along with the event of change there is something else going on. What happens within us when we experience change is another process that might better be called transition. Every change involves a transition, an emotional journey we make from an ending of what was, venturing into and through an open space of uncertainty, when the past is gone and the future not yet arrived, as we make our way toward a new beginning.

The winds of change blow us away from our past, and they blow things out of order, disrupt our patterns, challenge our habits, complicate our lives. I have learned that each phase of change leads me up to a threshold for more change to follow – each breeze of change opens the door for more gusts to blow through. Whether you are moving the furniture in your home or creating a new home, renewing a long-standing partnership or inviting someone new into your life, deepening your commitment to a beloved community or expanding your horizons with new loves, new commitments – in every transition we leave what is behind was, and in that leaving there is a loss. We spend a moment or an eternity in space of unknowing, when the past is no more and the future not yet resolved; and finally we move forward to embrace a new reality, a new understanding, a new partnership that will carry us into the future.

So today you met – in a virtual sense - the Reverend Christine Dance. You heard from her, and you heard about her from your friends on the Ministerial Search Committee. And in just three short weeks she will arrive here among you, eager to meet you, open to learn your history and hear about your plans and dreams. You will be learning about each other in the eight days she spends here with you, and you will be deciding whether to choose each other in the partnership that dances this congregation into the future.

Your Ministerial Search Committee has worked wisely and well, coming to a clear understanding of who and how this congregation is, and how you understand the song that is on the wind, how to listen for the song with both ears, how you are facing into the winds of the future. They have made their way through complicated choices with dedication and integrity, mindful always of the past, the present and the emerging future of this historic and courageous congregation. They have worked to understand this liminal place, this threshold on which you are poised; they have carefully considered what is known and so much unknown as the future unfolds before you.

As I looked back over the past several weeks of Sundays, I smile to realize how often, without

ever knowing the name of the minister who would become your candidate, we have been talking nearly every week about dancing – Reverend Patty Willis spoke of how we might dance our way to a Unitarian Universalist heaven; Carolyn Allenby led us in a dance for Together Time; everyone is invited to the community dance on April 20 -- and then we learn that you may be Dancing into the future in so many more ways than one.

And so I invite you, in all your threshold times, to let it be a dance -- a dance to the song that is carried on the wind of change, a dance that spins through sun and rain, through laughter and pain. I invite you to bend and shift with the fluid power of the music – I invite you to reach out, to hold and release the waiting hands of your partners in this beloved community as you move through the patterns that carry you into the future. In the spirit of love that connects this congregation to past and future, and to each other, I invite you now to rise in body or spirit and join in singing #311 Let It Be a Dance

Sources:

"The Wind in Both Ears," by Angus MacLean, in *The Wind in Both Ears* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965).

Angus MacLean, retrieved from <http://uudb.org/articles/angusmaclean.html>

Bridges, William (2004) *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.