

From Anxiety To Adaptation

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Biohazard. The red bin reads “biohazard.” I am in the emergency room. I have received the message, “That bin over there is dangerous. Stay away.” But by the time you, I, have arrived in the emergency room it is almost a funny warning. The emergency room is a place we end up after hazards take place.

I am waiting for my boyfriend, Earl, to come back from x-rays. He had an accident, like you do in one second when you are healthy, and the next second you fall and are NOT healthy. He had removed the very bloody shirt but there was still a tissue pressed up his nose not fully stopping the blood, and his hand, well, it didn’t take a doctor to know that something was wrong. Every few minutes, Earl, a man almost impervious to pain, who has spent a lifetime in construction and miraculously never broken a bone in his body, turns to me to say “God, it hurts.”

Red hazard. I am in the emergency room. There is danger, hurt, unknown time, pain, and problems, mysterious help all around me and I can do nothing, but wait and try to calm down and adapt to whatever has happened and will be.

I thought I did a good job adapting until I tried to go to sleep that night. Earl splintered the bone, a bad break. He needed surgery, but he would be fine. He will be just fine. He will be just fine.

It’s night time. Everyone is asleep. My son does not need me. Earl does not need me. I can not sleep. It’s 1AM and when I shut my eyes I see red hazard. I am still seeing red hazard. I have not adapted to what happened.

Adaptation. I like this word. It sounds and feels life giving, but it is so much harder than it sounds. I am not always good at adaptation. Most of us are not. I was lying in bed “hyper-vigilant,” extra awake even when exhausted. How humbling. I, the minister with pastoral care skills and psychological knowledge can not adapt. I can intellectually “diagnose” myself, but I can not adapt enough at the moment to sleep, although sleep was the most useful thing I could have done. Adaptation is not easy.

This summer I watched the 2003 film *Adaptation*, starring Nicolas Cage, Meryl Streep, and Chris Cooper; a remarkable, annoying, illuminating, irritating, loving film. In a remarkable adaptation from his tough guy image, Nicolas Cage plays twin screenwriters, Charles and Donald Kaufman. The character Charles is riddled with paralyzing self doubt and low self esteem. His twin, Donald (also played by Nicolas Cage) is optimistic, periodically self centered, yet experimental with enough confidence to weather problems and deficits, to fall down, dust himself off, and get back up. As the film opens Charles is attempting to adapt a screenplay and the film subjects us to the depth of his writer’s block which plagues both his professional and personal life.

Perhaps the most agonizing scenes are when Charles, who desperately fantasizes about women, can not kiss the woman he is with who obviously likes him. He refuses her offer to come into her house. He doesn’t kiss her goodnight. We hear Charles’

voiceover which goes something like “You are pathetic. Get out of the car, go right up to the door. Ring the bell and kiss her. Kiss her. I am going to kiss her.” Then Charles drives off without getting out of the car, going up to the door, or kissing the woman. It’s just awful. And so depressing. And so familiar. As the film progresses we quickly realize that Charles can’t do much of anything because he is so paralyzed with anxiety and fear. And even though everything starts to slip away, his career, his girlfriend, his self-esteem, he can not adapt.

I was more than half way through the film when I realized I was watching a movie about a man writing a screenplay adaptation who could not adapt, either personally or professionally. Early in the film his voiceovers take us through visual images of the creation of the earth, the big bang, volcanic fires, creation of water, and the first life emerging. These images of our constantly changing, chaotic world are thrown at the viewer, and Charles, with all his intelligence knows what it is, but can not embrace its message, everything changes, he/we must adapt.

I am reminded of Peter Steinke’s words in *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times* “Anxiety can hold us back, take us by the throat, and chain us like a slave.”¹ (Kiss her, kiss her!!! He’s not going to kiss her.) According to Steinke, anxiety decreases learning and the ability to take in new information, replaces curiosity with a need for certainty, stiffens our habits and beliefs, creates feelings of helplessness, and self doubt and distorts thinking. Yet this narrowness, grief, anger, anguish, choking, is but one path. Another path is *yasha*. As Steinke tells us, *yasha* means open space, salvation, room for passage, hope, and growth. When we can moderate our anxiety we have open space to adapt.

Adaptation is hard. Steinke uses the latest neurological research to explain why it is so hard. Our neocortex has two sides, right hemisphere and left hemisphere. “The right hemisphere is the hemisphere of novelty, exploration, and the unfamiliar; the left hemisphere is the hemisphere of routine, the storage of useful knowledge, and the known.”² New material “lights up” the right side.” Familiar friends and places light up the left side.

In addition, the left hemisphere processes positive emotions like happiness and security while the right hemisphere processes negative emotions like fear and anger. The same part of the brain that manages new information and people manages negative feelings. The same part of the brain that manages what is already known also manages positive feelings. So I am standing up here looking out at you. This is my tenth year of doing this. Many of you are still sitting in the same seat as you were ten years ago. My brain understands this as happy, familiar, and secure. I feel happy just looking at you. This is wonderful, it bonds people and groups together. But there is a down side.

You probably already know what it is. What is familiar is not always good for us. A diaper was good for me forty one years ago. It is not good for me today. If any of you have ever worked to toilet train a child, you know how that child has fought against a change that ultimately brings power and independence to the child. Yet most children resist the change, even when being in a diaper limits them. The comfort with familiarity is one, powerful reason that people keep using drugs and alcohol, can’t quite seem to

¹ Peter Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What* (2006), 8-9.

² Steinke, 131-132.

break free from an abusive relationship, won't stop driving when eyesight fails, are afraid to travel, learn a new language, spend time outside of their neighborhood, work, or "class position." We cleave to what is familiar, even when it is bad for us.

Adding to this, the right hemisphere, which takes in new information, simultaneously takes in negative feelings. Yes, the first day of school is scary. Yes, the thought of moving to a retirement community creates sadness because it is not the same as your home. Yes, it is awkward and painful to go on a first date. Yes, everyone feels nervous on the first day of work. But many of these things, as much as they come with negative feelings are good, necessary, healthy, helpful, empowering, and healing. So adaptation is not easy. Charles can not kiss her because he never has, kissing "her" would be unfamiliar. Yet kissing this wonderful woman who loves him would also be one of the healthiest things he could do. Watching anxiety overrule his ability to adapt is excruciating, and so human.

Long after Earl left the emergency room I was seeing red biohazard that night and the next night. I'm not familiar with emergency rooms. I am not familiar with Earl saying "God, it hurts" every four minutes. I was paralyzed, in that narrow place, struggling with distorted thinking and feelings of helplessness. The train had left the station. That wrist was broken. But I wasn't on it. Frankly, I was trying to live in denial which was ridiculous, and o, so human.

And in its own way the movie *Adaptation*, Steinke's book, and my trip to the emergency room were the perfect constellation. One morning, after ruminating on all of this, I suddenly understood something else, why so many of us are anxious about trying two worship services at First Church. We are anxious because it is not familiar. We are anxious because new ideas are processed with negative emotions. For some of us anxiety has produced problems with learning and the ability to take in new information, replaced curiosity with a need for certainty, stiffened our habits and beliefs, and created feelings of helplessness and self doubt. Suddenly I felt optimistic. This is normal, natural, probably necessary.

I recently looked at a list of members concerns about moving to two services. As I looked at the list I saw that more than half of the concerns were actually anxieties, worries, "Will there be enough ushers and RE volunteers?" "Will the choir need to sing at every service?" "Will we lose our sense of community?" The first three concerns, about ushers, RE and the choir can and will all be addressed (they are technical problems). The last question is the real question, "Will we lose our sense of community?" (this is an adaptive problem) Fussing over the details is a way to come closer to the bigger fear, that we will lose our sense of community as we change.

Will we lose our sense of community? Yes. Are we always losing our sense of community? Yes. Has our sense of community changed just in the ten years I have been here? Yes. Will it change again whether we grow or shrink, have one service, two, or three, yes. It's like those chaotic images of evolution and the violent formation of the earth. Upheaval is among us.

You know that. The character, Charles knows that. I know that. Does that help us adapt? Nope. There is a point where it is not about knowledge. It is about comfort with the unknown and evolution. I say this in great love, we are not comfortable with the unknown. This is human. Kiss her. Live. No, it is different and new.

Several years ago Ronald Heifitz published a book entitled *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. Heifitz theorizes that there are two kinds of problems, technical and adaptive. Technical problems have obvious solutions that can be addressed. Someone can break into a house. Put a lock on the door. It is dark in this room. Get a light. We like these kinds of problems. They don't challenge us.

Adaptive problems are different. As Steinke notes, adaptive problems

Demand changes in values, attitudes, and behaviors.

People's hearts and minds need to change, not only their likes and dislikes.

Problems surface that no existing technical expertise can solve.

Leaders ask questions that challenge people's beliefs.

Problems require a mindset shift that will result in some loss, especially for people who benefited from previous circumstances or patterns . . .

Problem solving involves new experiments, uncertainty, and loss.³

Steinke concludes "To recognize and treat a problem as an adaptive challenge will rock the emotional boat. Leaders cannot expect members to change without objection. People expect their leaders to offer certainty, not to disturb them with unknowns. Likewise, people expect their leaders to secure order rather than confront them with disturbing choices."⁴ Yet Steinke, and every other writer I know, regularly say that the test and merit of a leader resides in that person's ability to help others face and manage adaptive change. Leaders have to have the courage to face and feel pain for the greater good of the organization because life and health are based on adaptation.

It might feel like our Board is inept because we have a fear about going to two services, but that is not the case. The Board exercises leadership by addressing the issue. We fear because it is new. Our fear does not always indicate if something is good or bad. Fear might just indicate that something is new, resting in the right hemisphere of our brains, and adaptive, requiring a change in behavior, attitude, and/or thought.

Planning, creating, debuting, and adjusting two services is also a spiritual journey because on this road we struggle to adapt our behaviors and attitudes, just as we do in life. This hurts. You are welcome to object. This is natural, good, necessary and the adaptation continues.

As the movie *Adaptation* reveals, life is one big adaptation, from birth to death. I am not entirely happy about this. You might not be either. But as surely as the character Charles needs to kiss that woman, you and I need to adapt because adaptive challenges are constant. Someday you and I will need to move to a retirement community (maybe you already have). Someday you and I will need to stop drinking or smoking (maybe you already have). Someday our last child will leave home. Someday you and I will retire. Someday you and I will need to travel someplace unfamiliar, whether to Uzbekistan or the West End. Someday you and I will need to learn how to use a cell phone, a computer, or an oxygen tank. During Hurricane Katrina, my friend who live in New Orleans had to learn how to text message because there was no telephone access. It happens.

As Unitarian Universalists, one of the sources we draw from is "Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and

³ Steinke, 127.

⁴ Steinke, 128.

warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.” Reason says change is eternal. Science says change is life. This is the world we live in and regardless of how I feel, I would rather move through the narrow choking passage to the salvation of open space, the adaptive change on the other side of anxiety. As *Adaptation* concludes, Charles finally kisses the woman. Amen and amen.