



## **Generation to Generation**

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Whosoever wishes to know about the world must learn about it in its particular details.  
 Knowledge is not intelligence.  
 In searching for the truth be ready for the unexpected,  
 Change alone is unchanging.  
 The same road goes both up and down.  
 The beginning of a circle is also its end.  
 Not I, but the world says it: all is one.  
 And yet everything comes in season.

-Heraklitos of Ephesus

A basic challenge in life is to accept the theory, articulated by Heraklitos, that change alone is unchanging. Heraklitos was famous for saying things like “We never enter the same river twice.” We never enter the same river twice.

How we wish it weren't so. It is so.

An experience of humanity is the illusion of power and control. It's a reasonable illusion. We are born, grow, only fully experience our own thoughts and feelings, as much as we might be compassionate, curious, well read or well travelled. The human experience is by its very nature, self-focused and isolated, and in truth, afraid of extinction, the end of what we know. Because here is the real shock; you and I will end and the world will go on without us.

It seems to me that there are two major ways to approach this isolated experience and mortal dilemma; fight it (I am not growing older, nothing is changing, I am in control) or accept it with a laugh (yes those are grey hairs on my head and this river I am crossing is not the same one I crossed a minute ago because change is eternal). I think I will be bemused until my death with the later notion. I am bemused that everything slips by, the good and bad, and the passage itself is eternal, not the good or bad.

This philosophy, so well articulated by Heraklitos, comes as a shock, especially in congregations. I am not the first person to notice that people join congregations and come to worship looking for stability. If I had any doubt I am reminded of this on a weekly basis. People here notice if the

flowers move, the candles move, the hymns move, and they comment upon this. Equilibrium was disturbed. In searching for the truth we were unprepared for the unexpected.

I think many of us come with a secret hope that here in this sanctuary, life will be timeless and order will reign. Friends, that is the definition of death. In life plaster falls and pianos move. Death offers timelessness and order. It is a permanent solution, of what, we know not, but from our view here on earth it is permanent.

If change is a constant of life than we really are not in control. We really are not in control. I think many of us showed up here for an escape from this reality.

There are of course entire decades and generations when a congregation can seem to defy change. Same minister, music, members, location. It appears timeless and order reigns, or that which we know, which we assume is order but is really just that which we know and hope will always be but can never always be because in life change alone is unchanging.

This summer I had an epiphany from a collection of thoughts that had been gathering force within me for some time, we at First Church are in the midst of a major generational change. For our health, mourning, and healing I want to name this. When I arrived here 13 years ago there were certain members that were pillars, forces of nature, in our congregational life. They seemed eternal; Ed and Ginny Lutton, George Malone, Tommie Thompson, Jim Percival, Pat Davis, Sue Koehler, Frank Homan, David Jackson, Betty Brothers, John Christenson, Duane Christy, Logan Wiley. Between them all they probably had over four hundred years of membership at First Church.

It felt like we stood on their greatness; their longevity and integrity. And they have all died; several of them in just the past year. When Ginny Lutton died this spring, just shy of 100 years of age, I felt an era here had ended. She and her husband, Ed, joined 61 years ago. And because they were with us so long it was like we almost didn't notice the passage, the change of time even when first one of their daughters and then a Lutton granddaughter became a UU minister.

For those of us who have been here over a decade, this is a shared and familiar feeling, sentiment, and experience. Those of us who know and feel this story are mourning. For the 48% of our members who have joined in the last five years, this is unfamiliar, and only somewhat shared. Since many of these members are unknown to you, you are not mourning, not because you lack compassion or care, but because these members who were pillars to longer time members, are unknown to you.

Since I am committed to the philosophy that change along is unchanging I often find myself astride two horses here, one horse of the way we were and mourning the losses and one horse of who we are now and who we are poised to become. Honestly, I don't have a favorite horse. I don't. I love our new members and visitors as much as our old members and visitors. I love all the children up front during the chalice song (new). I love the new Adult Education Committee and programs they have created (new). I love our Assistant Minister, Reverend Annie Foerster and Facility Manager, John Hines and our multiple RE teachers filling newly created staff roles. I love the proposed new website (created by mostly new members). I love the Strategic Planning Committee and their current work on vision, and they are personed by two longer term members and four newer members. I love the new. I love the old. I love it all.

And there are days sometimes when I am very confused. You speak to me sometimes from two different horses in two separate languages at times. Maybe you gathered here have also had that experience. Maybe more than torn you are confused. Who was Ginny Lutton? Why do we need two services? Who was Pat Davis? What is the Endowment Fund? How come the choir doesn't sing every Sunday? Why do we use guitars during services? Why did the coffee hour move? I didn't notice it moved.

It is no mystery that we are in the midst of a lot of congregational change. We are growing numerically, and organizationally (remember all that talk about shared governance). Our long term members are dying causing many of us to struggle with feelings of loss while we welcome so many new members which is such a joy. We are moving from a pastoral size congregation to a program sized congregation.

In a pastoral size congregation everyone knows everyone else and everyone has fairly easy access to the one minister. There is less programming, more uniformity (like the same choir and music styles every Sunday). In a program sized congregation the staff grow as does the programming that is offered, there is more variety in music to meet increasingly diverse musical tastes. The budget grows, the emphasis on quality grows. There is often more than one minister and he/she is not immediately available because there are so many appointments.

So yes, there is a lot going on and we are in a period of more rather than less transformation and transition. But as much as some of us struggle to adjust, this really is a good time for First Church. Our longer term members have given this congregation great stability, not only in commitment and service, but in stewardship and generosity. We are one of the few congregations I know that has weathered our current recession without financial cuts.

In fact, our operating budget has successfully grown in the past two years. Part of that is due to the new members. And part of it is also due to a long standing culture of careful money management, care for the building, and holding finances in reserve in case of sudden issues. We need one another. Our Endowment Fund has grown because that is part of a long standing culture in this congregation. Members have recently updated the Constitution and By-laws when needed, upheld the democracy inherent in our congregational polity, and made First Church a place where you can find a friend or get a meal when you are in need. We have a wonderful legacy of stability and endurance. If you have been here ten years or more you can take pride that you are part of this. It is a great gift.

It is a gift that helps us make necessary changes, like updating a web page and adding staff, holding capital campaigns to renovate parts of the building that is worn, and comfortably initiating new social justice programs. It is our stability that makes this much positive change possible. As church management consultant Peter Steinke writes "A system needs change as well as stability. Living things grow and develop. They are not static. There is a time for sameness, and time for transformation . . . a time to survive, and a time to risk . . . a time for reaction, and a time for reflection . . . a time to be stable, and a time to be resilient."<sup>1</sup>

But here is the thing I have come around to knowing, we were changing even without all the new members. Some of us lament that we no longer all meet together in one Sunday morning worship

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works* (1993 ), 52.

service. The reality is that we are too big for that. Here is the other reality, we are not all “here” anymore. Many of the people we are used to seeing like George Malone or Ginny Lutton or Pat Davis, simply are no longer among the living. We can not physically see them on Sunday mornings. We never enter the same river twice. If you are like me sometimes they are here with us on a Sunday morning. I feel them around me in the memories of this sanctuary. But I do not see them. Sometimes just because I remember but don’t see, I feel sadness when I come into this beautiful, life filled sanctuary. I feel laughter that the children are singing, holding hands, displaying bed head and bright colors and I feel sad that Ginny Lutton is not here to see this, because she always treasured such a sight.

There is an added edge to our generational change here at church. Our country is in the midst of change. We are still coming out of a recession and job concerns and financial worries are significant personal stresses. Personal stresses make people anxious. The political climate is divisive and negative, which makes people anxious. Some days it is a challenge to not bring that anxiety and negativity here, even though our operating budget is balanced and we share more values that our country as a whole. It is easy to perceive change here or anywhere as bad, but included in every change and struggle is the opportunity for growth and increased maturity. So take a breath. It is good.

As Peter Steinke again explains in a chapter entitled “What Shall It Profit a Parish If It Gets over the Hump but Falls into the Abyss”

Automatic processes are designed for survival. They serve us best in the short run for emergencies. If a person or group relies solely or consistently on the processes, the very survival that it sought is undermined. Automatic behavior is the hallmark of immature people. Bent on survival, they accept few challenges and experience little growth. Immature people react with a small part of themselves to a small part of their world. They limit themselves by paying attention only to what is close up, by focusing on the moment, and by posturing in defense . . . Maturity increases survival. For the long haul, reflection and resilience are needed. Mature people respond with a large part of themselves to a large part of their world. They move beyond limiting conditions by seeing what might yet be, by allowing time for things to process and by responding with self-control and poise. They have a great capacity to modify and shape their environment.<sup>2</sup>

Change is happening. We do not need to run through it. Rather examine it and learn. We are safe. We are growing. Reflect. Contribute with poise and self control. Aim for the greater good. Everything is slipping across the universe. All is well and all will be well.

Just to give you some healthy reality checks. Cultural change in a congregation takes about seven years. I think we are about three to four years through our current transition. New staff members need about three years to successfully develop programs. Successes before the first year were already in the system. This is according to church consultant Dan Hotchkiss. He explains that before staff settle in they often ruffle feathers and that is natural and increases the time line for success.

First Church is fine. Actually we are very healthy. Thanks to new and old members, friends, and visitors for your gifts. You make us succeed. If you are feeling out of touch, here are some

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 94.

suggestions; 1) we all feel out of touch. I feel out of touch. Right now some “out of touch” is the norm, 2) wear your name tag so we can get to know one another. I have an excellent memory for names and I am not embarrassed to say I can no longer remember everyone’s name – there are 400 adults and children here now, 3) If you become a member participate in a small group or circle supper, 4) attend community builder events like those dinners attached to adult education classes with child care included, 5) if you are a committee member consider ways your committee can create or enhance cross generational events where people get to know one another, 6) step out of the “old/new” mold. If you are a long time member join RE. If you are new member, join the Extended Ministry Committee, 7) Participate in social justice activities, clean up days, and meal preparation opportunities, 8) find someone you don’t know every Sunday and say “Hello,” 9) Ask questions and listen to one another (“who was Ginny Lutton,” “what do your children like about RE?,” “What brought you here?” - a good question for new and old members), 10) Remember if you are changing or experiencing change that is a good thing because it means you are alive, 11) If you need help ask for it –tell the person next to you whether new or old. Something that connect us is that we all care. There is not one person here who would not care if you turned to them and said “I am having a hard day today – I don’t know anyone, I am thinking about x loss.” We are connected by care and humanity. Embrace your vulnerability! Tell a story, ask for help.

I think these are great times to be at First Church. Go forth and have them.