

Change

Isaiah 43:18-19; Romans 12:1-2

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Years ago, I was sitting at the kitchen table with my in-laws—Deb’s family—and some neighbors, on their farm in Southern Illinois. I don’t really recall the specific ongoing conversation, but there had been news about space flights. At some point I asked those at the table, both family and neighbors, if they might think about the most significant technological advance of their lifetimes. Given the news I was expecting something about space or computers, or maybe even the emerging spread of mobile phones. After some paired conversations around the table my father-in-law said, “electricity.” And the others of his generation nodded in agreement. I later asked my father the same question. While he was a career academic, he had grown up working fields with a team of horses and a one-bottom plow. He agreed that “lectricity” was probably most significant and recounted that his father had first put in a lightbulb in the barn—not the house—in order to alieve the concern over kerosene lanterns being knocked over and setting everything on fire. Now, this was just the generation before me, and not even twenty years before I was born.

When viewed this way, change can be head spinning. Not to mention our collective and rapid adaptation to fusion church in the last year and a half. Along these lines, I wonder what you might answer to the same question I asked my father and father-in-law? One point to be gleaned from this is how something so revolutionary at the time, seems to us today so routine that we would be surprised by the answer.

So, the topic is change. Not whether any particular change is good, bad, beneficial, etc. Our experience of change can be any of these. Let’s be certain about this...even if we are not noticing, change is in the works, somewhere in our collective lives. I would suggest that the assumption that we can somehow be isolated from the effects of changes in other parts of our social or physical world, is not an assumption supported by the facts of history.

My focus for this morning, however, is more on how we participate in ongoing change, and what does our faith tell us about how we might better, or simply put, should approach change.

While considering this, you may want to keep in the back of your mind the following question: Who or what persons, societies, or circumstances in the Biblical accounts was ever allowed to remain as they were? In fact, how did most of the characters of the Bible react when change was in the air?

Regarding how we participate in change, the following most often seems to be the case—we are at the tail end of change. That is, change comes upon us, sometimes surprisingly, often unwelcome, though occasionally gladly received. But what is our reaction to such change? I would suggest that, typically, it is resistance. Even if the change is good for us, it can take a while for us to wrap our minds, and our wills around it.

Then there are those occasions in which we are the instigator. In these instances we still have to overcome resistance—whether our own, such as in New Year’s resolutions to do or be better in some

way, or in attempting to get others to agree to go along with us on some venture—perhaps the idea of fusion church?

Is there any better, or perhaps more relevant instance of both circumstances of change—change that just seems to happen to us as well as our efforts to make changes happen, than our collective experience of the Pandemic? On the one hand something, the Covid-19 virus just seemed to happen to us. On the other, once we wrapped our minds around it we then often found ourselves caught up in masks and rights, and now vaccinations and all of the “talk” and opinions surrounding this event in our lives. It is clear that in the midst of “something happening to us,” we are not so collectively clear as to what we should do. Resistance, compliance, adaptation are all vying for behavioral attention these days.

But how to understand this? In my teaching days I often referred to a model that I could represent with a pyramid divided into layers and assigned percentage values. Each layer represented a basic kind of human behavior. While based on research, I won't claim all the values are absolutely correct, but you'll get the emphasis and the idea. The model's purpose is actually more about highlighting something about us all.

At the bottom of the pyramid and representing 75% of human behavior is the label “non-cognitive.” It is routine behavior to which we just do not give much if any thought at all. While our brains control a vast array of behaviors, most of these do not raise to the level of our consciousness—unless something goes wrong or someone like me points it out. Take breathing, for example. We just breathe. But we do notice it on those occasions when we exert, or when we are surprised, or when someone like me points it out. Just for fun, try, right now, to breathe normally. Is that even possible? Instead, it's just better for us all to breath without thinking. It's easier, less stressful, works better, etc. How about walking? Some of us have had to learn to walk after some event, such as surgery.

A somewhat higher order, but still largely non-cognitive behavior is driving on the right side of the road. Imagine if everyone had to once again be reminded of what side of the road to drive on? We don't really think about it, unless you are watching of those British detective shows that Deb and I like to watch. Those give me just a little dissonance when I see them getting in on the wrong side of the car and driving on the left. I think you are getting the point and can likely think of many other “automatic” behaviors.

Back to the pyramid. The second layer, constituting about 20% of our behavior, is emotional. Basically, it is reaction to events in the non-cognitive realm that no longer work without thinking—like walking for those of us with bad knees—or we are ambushed by a mutant virus. The point is, we have “feelings” about what has just happened. It is often captured by the moment when something, or someone we have “taken for granted” is no longer present to us in the usual way. And, our emotions manifest in enormously wide ranges in type and intensity. Stubbing your toe, becoming off balance, and dropping something you are carrying in a room full of others brings along with it an immediate and intense feeling, often of embarrassment. We just want to hide. But such is also typically a brief experience, and we reorient pretty quickly. But the experiences can also be very long lasting, and even debilitating, such as PTSD from a long list of very intense life events. What is common is that it is how we feel, in the moment of our everyday routines now not functioning, that is the predominant generator of our behavior. We might be excited, happy, nervous, depressed, or angry. All are such reactions. How long they last depends. On what? On our ability to move to the next level of the pyramid.

If you are calculating with me we've already used up 95% of the behavioral value. That doesn't leave much—just 5%. But it is in that 5% that we have the potential to overcome our emotional states, and to

redefine our routines—the non-cognitive behaviors. Some never seem to get there, or get there only now and then. They seem to fluctuate between the routines, and the emotional, and never quite resolving.

So, what is that 5%. Well, I don't have an especially compelling division of that small tip of the pyramid. But Isaiah tells us to simply be expecting God to do new things. This is faith. Paul is telling us to renew our minds, to think anew. In other words, pay attention, notice, consider, reflect. This is not meant to shut down emotions, or our routines. But in paying attention we can begin moving from "being at the tail end of things" to securing, both spiritually, and in our everyday lives, and kind of volition, or the exercising of choices, the making of decisions. As an educator I always argued for expanding that 5%, as I believe it keeps us from being tossed around by events, including being tossed around by others. In this way of thinking, seeking advice can be both a function of emotional comfort, or a reasoned approach to some choice that needs to be made. My point is, we are better off having both faith and cognition as a stronger part of our lives together. With such, the challenges of change are less likely to overwhelm us into inaction.

At the same time, we need emotional support, as such is a most powerful motivator for action, or inaction. We benefit from the comfort of sympathy, and the efforts of others to make us feel better. But unless we actually address the underlying issues or events, we usually do not get resolution.

So how might this all apply? Futurists (perhaps a fancy name for "guessers") and demographers—those who study population trends—have been suggesting a rather startling picture about our children. Bluntly stated, many demographers are projecting that upwards of 50% of today's 18 year-olds will live through the year 2100. Put another way, 50% of the traditional entering classes at AU and A State could be having 75th year reunions in 2100. Put it any way you want, but this changes all kinds of non-cognitive routines we carry around with us about life now, and tomorrow.

To cement this vision a bit, I asked you all to access a photo from your younger days. Some of you have those with you here in the sanctuary. Some of you on Zoom can share these with family and friends there. But here's the exercise. Take a look at those photos and recall—or try to recall—what that person in the picture has on their mind. What is forefront? What is urgent? Is there anything there at all? Perhaps it may mostly be a soup of emotions. One question in particular is, what did that young person anticipate. What did they think was going to happen next, or perhaps what did they see as their future. And, how long did that future reach?

On my phone I have yearbook photos from 1974. At the time of these Deb and I had not yet met, though we soon would on a college trip. I had not yet declared a major, and mostly was interested in friends and tennis. Not so deep. Deb began to change that, though it was not for another year or so that I declared sociology as a major, but with a target of going to law school. While I kept the major, I did not go to law school, instead going to grad school. For better or worse, I would not be here, and you all would not likely have benefited from knowing Deb, had I stayed the course with law.

My point is, we cannot know, with any certainty, even a few years out. Just two years ago we did not yet even know of Covid-19. For our youth, try to imagine yourselves, and the rest of us imagining them, in the year 2050. Not so far out in the breadth of time and history, but still, a boggling thing to try to target. And in all that time, changes will continue to flow, both "at" us and "by" us. And we will continue to fluctuate between our routines and our emotions. But as Isaiah and Paul speak to us across the ages,

have faith and expect, rather than be surprised all the time by the continued works of God. And, consider Paul's call for a renewing of our minds, so that we can then somehow "know" the will of God.

Almost done...

I have a few quick items, just for fun, that perhaps makes the points I've been trying to make a bit more lasting. No more models or sociology. Rather some famous as well as some infamous statements about change and the future. First a couple of quotes:

"To raise new questions, new possibilities, to regard old problems from a new angle, requires creative imagination and marks real advance in science." Albert Einstein

"Innovation— any new idea—by definition will not be accepted at first. It takes repeated attempts, endless demonstrations, monotonous rehearsals before innovation can be accepted and internalized by an organization. This requires courageous patience." Warren Bennis (authority and consultant on organizational behavior, leadership, and change)

And now for the infamous:

"Everything that can be invented has been invented." Charles H. Duell, Director of US Patent Office 1899

"Sensible and responsible women do not want to vote. Grover Cleveland, 1905

"Who wants to hear actors talk? Harry M. Warner, Warner Bros Pictures, 1927

"There is no likelihood man can ever tap the power of the atom. "— Robert Miliham, Nobel Prize in Physics, 1923

"Heavier than air flying machines are impossible. "— Lord Kelvin, President, Royal Society, 1895

"Ruth made a big mistake when he gave up pitching. — Tris Speaker, 1921

"The horse is here today, but the automobile is only a novelty – a fad. President of Michigan Savings Bank advising against investing in the Ford Motor Company

"Video won't be able to hold on to any market it captures after the first six months. People will soon get tired of staring at a plywood box every night, "— Daryl F. Zanuck, 20th Century Fox, commenting on television in 1946

"What use could the company make of an electric toy? Western Union, when it turned down rights to the telephone in 1878."