

One Line Summary: In order to move through change, we must allow ourselves to feel the emotions associated with change.

I entered the patient's room, introducing myself as the chaplain. Sam was in his 50's and had recently been diagnosed with terminal cancer. I had been referred by the nurse case manager, who said that he might be helped by a chaplain visit.

"Good morning," I said. "What's going on for you?"

"I've got this diagnosis that's not so good," he said.

"Is there anything you want to talk about?"

"No. If I talk about it, I'm going to feel stuff I don't want to feel."

"I'm going to feel stuff I don't want to feel." How many of us have been in that situation. Not wanting to feel? Afraid to feel? Feeling guilty about what we are feeling?

Hospital patients and families are often in the middle of change, sometimes life altering change. They might have just received a terminal diagnosis, as had this patient. They might have been diagnosed with cancer and be facing an arduous treatment regimen of uncertain outcome. They might have just had a baby--or lost a baby. Injuries sustained in an accident might have just altered their expectations of how the rest of their life will be lived.

My goal as a chaplain was simple. Listen and let feel. That's it. Listen and let feel. That's how we were trained. We were not there to proselytize. We were not there to explore the patient's theology, although we would walk that path with them if they wanted to.

Listen and let feel. These are powerful gifts that we gave as chaplains. More often than not, patients I met would open up in ways that they usually or perhaps never did. There would be tears. There would be laughter. There would be anger. There would be fear. Sometimes there would be a shift--perhaps toward acceptance, perhaps toward resolve.

In one memorable experience, I had the privilege of being with a family in the time before they removed life support from their grown daughter. She had overcome much in her life, being wheelchair-bound from a young age, and had recently been hit by a car in a parking lot. Her brain injuries were massive. Her organs were to be donated. I facilitated prayer and ritual with the family gathered around their daughter. They each shared memories of her life and how they had been touched by her. There were tears and laughter in this most extraordinary of circumstances. I'm sure that in that room there was also anger, but it

did not express itself on that day. The family was hugely grateful for what I offered them--a safe place to be heard and to express their feelings. I am reasonably sure that they were each helped in some small or large way by the sharing of feelings which took place in that room.

The Buddha addressed change in his first sermon at Sarnath, in which he set forth his Four Noble Truths. Some, perhaps many, of you are familiar with these. The first Truth states that life inevitably involves suffering, dissatisfaction, and distress. The second Truth states that this suffering is caused by the need to hold onto that which is impermanent. The bad news is that everything in life is impermanent. We grow old, we get sick, we die. Our life situations change--for better or for worse. If we don't try to hang on to that which is impermanent, we are told in the 3rd Truth, then suffering ceases. Finally, the Buddha said that we can be released from suffering through following the Noble Eightfold Path.ⁱ

Now this is not a sermon on Buddhism. I'm not going to tell you that you can be released from suffering caused by change. Maybe you can. I have studied Buddhism, but I am not a practitioner nor an expert. My point is not nearly so all-encompassing. What I am saying is that acknowledging the emotions that come up when we are experiencing change can help.

In the Disney/Pixar movie *Inside Out*, we view the life of an adolescent girl, Riley Andersen, through her emotions. Her emotions are likeable characters, consisting of Sadness, Joy, Anger, Disgust and Fear. Except for disgust, these are the same four emotions I worked with as a chaplain. The emotions work tirelessly from a control room behind the scenes to influence Riley's life. She has recently moved from an idyllic life in Minnesota, where she played hockey, to San Francisco. She is experiencing the expected difficulties of adapting to a new school, loss of close friends, a new house, lost furniture and trying out for a new hockey team. Joy runs a tight ship and the other emotions defer to her, agreeing that Riley needs to feel happy. However, true to their own natures, they tend to accidentally sabotage what Joy is trying to do. Yet Joy succeeds in mostly squelching Riley's other emotions, with increasingly dire consequences. Finally, Riley becomes so miserable in her enforced happiness that she takes drastic measures.

Near the end of the movie Riley steals her mother's credit card and uses it to purchase a bus ticket to runaway, back to Minnesota, back to where she was happy. She is on the bus, about to head east across the Bay Bridge, when Joy realizes that her plan has failed. Riley needs to feel Sadness and Fear and Anger to accept the changes in her life. Joy sets her fellow emotion, Sadness, loose on Riley. As waves of sadness

wash over her, she realizes she is making a big mistake. She hops off the bus and makes her way home to her distraught parents. There, sitting on the kitchen floor together, still with no furniture, they have a family cry, sharing their experiences of loss. Riley is finally free to feel the joy of what her new life brings her.

Mental health experts tell us that all change is stressful, not just the kind of changes often seen in the hospital. Even that which is perceived as good and desirable adds stress to our lives. Vacations are stressful. Getting married is stressful. In short, change is stressful.

In the life of this congregation, we are experiencing extraordinary change. You have called a new minister after six years of ministry by Sydney and Dennis. I have been called by you as your new minister. As excited as you are about having a called minister, a goal toward which you have been working for more than ten years, there are other emotions floating around. If they are not yet present, they likely will be.

I imagine sadness over the loss of Sydney and Dennis as your ministers. There will be sadness over the loss of the church you once were as this congregation continues to grow. There is likely fear about how I will do things; will I make sweeping changes? (The answer is no.) I identified myself as panentheist in a sermon I gave during my candidating week. I imagine fear about how I might not be welcoming to atheists and humanists. (My practice, when I write sermons and prayers, is to imagine how they will be received by individuals representing the broad spectrum of UU beliefs. That is not to say that I will address all beliefs in any one prayer or sermon! smile) I also imagine little voices in the backs of heads saying "That's silly" in a dismissive way. No. Emphatically no! Feelings are not silly. Observe your feelings without judgment.

There will be anger. Some of it will likely be directed toward me as I make missteps that I undoubtedly will make. Some of it will be more diffuse, perhaps not directed toward anyone or anything in particular, but just because. You are in the midst of change. Emotions happen. Anger happens. What is important is to acknowledge what one is feeling. Share with your partner or spouse or a close friend. If you are angry with me, share that with me--before it reaches the boiling point. If you are happy with what I am doing, share that, too. You can have both feelings simultaneously. I am a good listener.

I ask that I not become informed of issues with me through a third party. Three party relationships are called triangles in family systems theory, and they are never good for relations.

I also ask that I not be informed of serious issues through email. A wise philosopher/engineer I worked for once said that if you want to perpetuate or make a problem worse, email about it. If you want to solve the problem, pick up the phone or meet in person.

For my part, there will be sadness as I grieve what I have lost and what my family has lost. My family is also grieving. We have left the only house and community and church my girls have ever known; the house in which we shared a life with their late mother. A house where we lived for 17 years.

There will be frustrations as we learn a new church and a new community. Right now, everything takes an extraordinary amount of time. A seminary friend who has moved four times in four years says that one of the most difficult things about moving is that so many of the decisions we used to make on autopilot now require conscious effort and research. Where do I go to get my car worked on? Where do I go to get my pants repaired. Now, how do I get there? Let's not even talk about the effort required to find a way for me and my family into a new medical system.

I am overjoyed to be your new minister. Landing in this community, in this congregation, is a dream come true. Early in the process of becoming a minister, in answering one of the hundreds of self-reflective questions I was asked, I considered what my ideal congregation would look like. I answered simply; a healthy congregation in a university town. Does this sound familiar? (smile) And I am absolutely loving our Bidwell Park and discovering the many other wonderful assets of our community.

Each week I get to know more of you. I enjoy working with your leaders. I am grateful to be leading worship again. I love Sunday mornings. They feed me through the week. It is my goal that they do the same for you.

And where do I go to acknowledge the fear and sadness and anger that naturally come up in the midst of so much change? I have a Spiritual Director, a UU minister, with whom I have worked for years. I have a mentor, a UU minister here in Northern California. I have colleagues and friends whom I call. I will meet with Pacific Central District colleagues two weekends from now at our fall retreat in Petaluma. I am beginning to develop a network of ministers and chaplains here locally. Over time, some of them will become friends and confidantes. I have a wonderfully supportive partner in my fiancé, Margaret. And if I have a particular issue or concern, I will talk with you about it--individually or collectively, as appropriate.

Where do you go to air your feelings? If you don't have someplace where you can do this safely, I encourage you to find one. I encourage you to use me as a resource. While I am not a therapist, I am a compassionate listener with many hundreds of hours of training as a chaplain. Listening is part of my job description as your minister.

Change is a tough but unavoidable part of life. Acknowledging the feelings associated with it can make it easier. And who knows? To paraphrase Mr. Twain, perhaps in all this change we will accomplish miracles together.

Blessings Be and Amen.

ⁱ Mary Pat Fisher, Living Religions, 8th ed. p 142