

Leaving your Comfort Zone

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We tried something new at one of the first worship services I helped plan at my internship site: we asked the congregants, as they entered the sanctuary, to take a piece of colored yarn and then sit in the section marked with the same color as their yarn. That meant that they would not sit with the people they came with. Some thought that was fun. Some of them did not like the idea, but went along anyway. And some of them refused - they wanted to decide where they would sit.

We did this ostensibly because we needed an equal number of people in each of the seven sections. But another reason was to get people out of their comfort zone for just a short time. By sitting in a different spot, with different people, congregants would get a different sense of community – no strangers, but neither the community they were used to. A slightly different mix. Why did we want that?

Because - whenever we move from our usual position, our perspective, our view changes. We see things in a different way.

In order to show you what I mean by comfort zone, I'd like to tell you about the times in my life when I left my comfort zone, consciously and more or less voluntarily.

Until I decided to go seminary, I had been very reluctant to do anything or go anywhere if I wasn't familiar with it - unless somebody went with me. I did not have a choice this time. Going to Seminary in Lancaster required 2 or 3 days away from home, so I was going to be alone in my strange new endeavor. Not only was I leaving my family and friends behind, I also left my Unitarian Universalist community. I went to a Christo-centric seminary, and although it was a very liberal place, I was definitely a minority, with often "weird" ideas and opinions.

I was apprehensive, to say the least, when I first moved into the commuter housing building on the campus of Lancaster Theological Seminary. I kept saying to myself: "Why on earth am I doing this? Is it too late to turn around?" To my amazement, every endeavor I started in Lancaster turned into a positive experience very soon. I don't mean to imply that everything was fine and dandy throughout the three years. No, there were times when I was frustrated and angry; but it always worked out very fast; and it turned out to be a fantastic learning experience.

Looking back, I can now say that those three years count among the happiest and most fulfilled in my life. And I am so glad that I didn't turn around.

Of all the temptations we meet in life, money, power, sex, alcohol, drugs, and fame, perhaps the subtlest of all is the "comfort zone",—that invitation to settle for less. The path that takes us out of the comfort zone is what Scott Peck calls "*the road less traveled*". Most of us, when we come to that place where the two paths divide, tend to prefer the one that leads to safety, to warmth, and to comfort.

The comfort zone is seductive. We all desire comfort. It's human nature. However, too much comfort does not serve us well. An inability to step out of our comfort zone will profoundly limit our performance. If we are going to thrive in a world of rapid and accelerating change, we must be adept at adapting. Single-employer careers are history; and single-profession careers barely remain and will soon be gone. The more comfortable we are with taking risks and dealing with the resulting fear, the better we will be at adapting.

Yes, change can be frightening. Actually, right after public speaking, change is the single greatest source of fear we all face. Change confronts us with one of the most frightening of situations: the unknown. Although it is perfectly normal to be fearful of change, such a fear response can immobilize us.

When I applied for internships in nine different UU-congregations across the United States and Canada, I was hoping and praying that either Annapolis or Baltimore would accept me, because they were closest to home. I did not want to leave my comfort zone a second time. Well, the first congregation who called with a definite interest in me was in British Columbia! But then both Baltimore and Huntington invited me for an interview. And then I had to make a decision – it was not easy. I finally chose Huntington because it was not quite as far as British Columbia, but not as close to home as Baltimore. I knew from my seminary experience that leaving my comfort zone was necessary to help me with my learning. And of course living at home with two overgrown teenagers would have interfered with my learning, too.

Albert Einstein, my favorite “wise guy” once wrote, “*The definition of insanity is to continue to do the same things in the hope that those things will miraculously achieve a different result*”. In other words, “Keep doing what you are doing and you will keep getting what you have been getting”. So – if we want change, either in our professional or our private life – we need to stop doing what we’re doing in order to achieve a different result. And that usually means to leave our comfort zone, sometimes only temporarily, sometimes for good.

When I had to start working as a chaplain at a hospital, as part of my preparation for ministry, I did not want to go. I hated hospitals, I was afraid of the pain and suffering I would encounter; but subconsciously probably more afraid of the pain inside me that might surface when confronted with the suffering in the sick rooms. After the first two hard weeks, I was slowly getting used to the work of a chaplain, and I had learned a few techniques that helped me as well as the patients. Most of all I realized that seminary—and parenthood—had indeed equipped me with a lot of very helpful knowledge. But then they assigned me to the trauma bay! The ultimate nightmare! Blood and gore, crying and screaming patients and relatives! No way! But of course I had to go. And wouldn't you know, it turned out to be my favorite rotation. I realized – after I had learned the basic, chaotic seeming system – that I worked best under pressure, that I could be very calm when relatives were hysterical, that I had more focus, the crazier the

world around me became. I would never have learned any of this if it hadn't been for being forced out of my comfort zone.

I am now getting to a point where I don't like it any more when something feels too comfortable. Just kidding.

Moving out of a comfort zone requires not only guts and commitment, but also at least some self-confidence. This is especially true when we look at our relationships. Whether it's friendships, marriages, or communities like our congregations; it is often advisable or even necessary to leave our comfort zone.

When raising children, you experience this phenomenon quite often: if you want to see what your toddler is looking at, you have to bend down, which might be a physical discomfort – but it might give you a different and better perspective on life. When your middle-schooler is actively involved in sports, you might have to spend hours on bleachers in the hot sun, or freezing in a drafty sports arena. But it will give you a wonderful sense of community and partnership with your child.

And later, when your teenager listens to loud music with strange lyrics, you will probably want to run away, or at least stuff cotton in your ears. You will get a sample of this in a few minutes, during the offering. But if you can overcome the discomfort of the noise and crazy rhythms, you might get an important insight into what the young people of the next generation are concerned about, and in what they are interested. When we do that, we put ourselves out there, in front of our child, in front of our spouse, in front of the world. We will – for a time – be in a situation with which we are not comfortable. But the end result is always that we learn something that we did not already know, we expand our knowledge, we change something. In my experience the successes far outnumber the flops. And - if we stay inside our Comfort Zone -we will never be able to expand our horizons and learn.

This is – of course – also true for our religious community. When we enter the sanctuary on a Sunday, we physically enter a comfort zone. We see the same people we see every Sunday. We sit in the same kind of chair, and hold an almost identical Order of Service in our hands. But this is also a Comfort Zone psychologically and spiritually: we can rely on certain traditions and rituals like chalice lighting, singing the children to class, *Spirit of Life*, closing words.

I have occasionally heard people say that they don't come to lay-led Sunday services, because there is always “so much experimenting” going on . . . In other words, their own comfort zone is being invaded! But isn't that a shame? They miss so many really good and interesting services. Those who are willing to experiment with us, their leaders, when we try out a new thing sometimes, or change something old and routine, usually don't regret it! They discover what power there is in change, and how much life there is in movement.

Our first hymn today was “*Thula Klizeo*”. The lyrics of this Zulu chant mean “*be still my heart, even here I am at home*”. Leaving your comfort zone makes your heart race

– that’s for sure. But spiritually, you can always take your home with you, can’t you? If you have a place of peace within you, you can risk much more, step out further; because your soul can be at rest, no matter what. The second hymn we sang was “*When I am Frightened*”. I picked this hymn because in it there is another answer to our worries about leaving the comfort zone – relationship, community. To have someone near you when you take a risky step makes everything so much easier, doesn’t it?

I invite you to look at your life, and see how much of what you are doing is motivated by comfort. I encourage you to challenge yourself as often as possible to leave the safety of your comfort zone. For example, examine your involvement in social justice work. Of course it is admirable – and necessary - to write a large check and donate it. But we can do much more when we actually, physically and emotionally, get involved. Like, for example, going to New Orleans to help with the clean-up – or helping to build a house with Habitat for Humanity. Or like volunteering to work with abused women and children. Or go to jail - as a literacy trainer. These activities are definitely not very comfortable, physically or emotionally.

But if you really want to make a difference, you have to have the courage to leave your comfort zone. Because, to paraphrase the Rev Dr Martin Luther King: “*The ultimate measure of a person is not where he or she stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he or she stands at times of challenge and controversy*”.