



*“I thought I’d stay home today  
and accept all those things I cannot change.”*

*Meta–Furs  
or, Look Out Below!*

*A Worship Service by the REV. JEFF BRIERE*

*Lynn Schmissrauter, preaching*

*Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga*

*September 28, 2008*

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*CONNECTIONS*

Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is Jeff Briere, I’m the minister of this congregation. We begin each Sunday at this time with Connections. This is a time of community and contemplation, where we share the joys and the sorrows going on in our lives. This is not a time for announcements, political statements or expressions of personal anger, but a time of deep sharing, where we are reminded that we are all human beings and we’re all in this together.

Enjoy the experience of sitting in restorative silence until you are moved to speak. Please allow a breath of silence after each person

speaks, so that we may focus our attention on what has been said.

Let us pause to dwell inward. Spirit of Life, please meet us where we are, in the struggles we choose for ourselves; in the ways we move forward in our lives, and bring our world forward with us. It is right that we pause to remember those who need love and support; who are ill or in pain, either in body or in spirit; who are lonely or have been wronged. Let us open our minds and hearts to a place of quiet, to a silent prayer for the healing of pain, and the soft, gentle coming of love. In this time of silence let our thoughts be with those who have spoken or been spoken about this morning. Amen and Blessed Be.

I ask you now to rise and greet your neighbors at the door. Please welcome them into the sanctuary with a hand of warmth and a smile.

*HYMN 361, Enter Rejoice & Come In*

*GREETINGS*

**Elaine.** I’m Elaine Watkins and I serve on the Board of Trustees. Thanks so much for joining us in worship today, and we welcome Lynn Schmissrauter to the pulpit. We hope you find the service rewarding and that you leave here inspired and uplifted. Please note the emergency exit over here to my right, now is the time to put your cell phone in “Worship Mode,” childcare for the young and the restless is available downstairs in the nursery, and after the service today, please join us for coffee and conversation in the fellowship area right back there.

If you have a particular joy or sorrow or something you’d like added to the prayer of the people, please clearly write it on an index card and drop it in the basket back there. You may sign it or not, as you wish.

**I have an important announcement.** *[Pause]* We have many

children in the religious education program and that's a good thing. Those children need teachers. They need your help. Today. See Jamie Sullivan or April Waggener and tell them you can help.

**A complete listing of announcements** is included with the bulletin and is available on our web site. The best way to find out what's going on around here is to sign up for a weekly e-mail. To do that, please see Chris in the office.

For music, Nancy & Kate have prepared several pieces from the repertoire of Fritz Kreisler.

*PRELUDE*  
*Andantino*

*LIGHTING THE CHALICE*

In the light of truth and the warmth of love,  
we gather to seek, to sustain, and to share.

*UNCLE VERNE'S VISITOR*

Did I ever tell you the story of my Uncle Verne and his midnight visitor? No. When I was a young boy, my father wasn't around too much, but my Uncle Verne was. And he was like a father to me. Uncle Verne lived alone in a small house waaaaay up in the hills. He was a simple man, and didn't own many things. He didn't have a car. He rode an old bicycle that he found and restored. He only had two pair of pants, two shirts, a sweater and a jacket. He always said that he didn't need much to be happy. He lived a simple life.

One evening, he was out for a stroll. Uncle Verne loved to look at the stars and the moon. And that night he was looking at the Harvest Moon, which happened just ten days ago this year. But Uncle Verne can't see this year's harvest moon. He died a long time ago. The

night he was out for a stroll I was about ten years old, I think. So all this happened a long time ago.

Anyway, when Uncle Verne came home, he discovered he had a visitor. A burglar had broken into the house and was rummaging through the drawers and looking in the cupboards.

The burglar didn't notice Uncle Verne, he just went on ransacking the house. Uncle Verne said, "Hello," and the burglar was so startled he fell down and dropped the flashlight he was using.

Uncle Verne smiled at the burglar, gave him his flashlight and shook his hand. "Welcome! Welcome! How nice of you to visit!"

The burglar opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He couldn't think of anything to say.

Uncle Verne had a peculiar habit—he never let anyone leave his home empty-handed. Even if you only dropped by to return a book, he always gave his visitors a flower or a cup of soup or a magazine to read. It was his way of saying "Thanks for visiting." Uncle Verne looked around the tiny hut for a gift for the burglar. But there was nothing to give. Not even a pencil.

The burglar began to back toward the door. He was scared of Uncle Verne and was ready to leave.

Uncle Verne took off his coat, which was old and tattered. "Here," he said. "Please take this. It will keep you warm."

The burglar was really scared now and he thought my uncle was crazy. He grabbed the robe and bolted out into the night.

Uncle Verne sat down on his front porch and looked at the moon, with its ruddy light spilling over the mountains, making all things quietly beautiful.

“Poor man,” lamented my uncle. “If only I could have given him this wonderful moon.”

*OFFERTORY*  
*Songs My Mother Taught Me*

On the last Sunday of the month, this church donates the offering, less pledge payments, to an outside agency working to make the world a better place. This morning, we will share the plate with The Sanctuary. The Sanctuary is a residential program for homeless women with a history of substance abuse, prostitution and incarceration. The Sanctuary provides residents with safe housing, a supportive community, job and life skills, employment and education opportunities, and treatment to support recovery from addictive substances and behaviors.

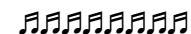
You may recall that I was on the original board of directors for The Sanctuary. I stepped down from the board last year. Our speaker today, Lynn Schmissrauter, was president when I was Vice President of the board.

The vision of The Sanctuary is to change the culture of prostituted women; to break the cycle of addiction and prostitution through supportive programs and supportive community; to meet women on the street where they are and help them move forward; to provide treatment for substance abuse to women who would not be able to afford or receive it otherwise; to provide medical, educational, social, relational, and emotional support to isolated and marginalized women; to be a known resource in the Chattanooga area for all homeless women suffering from abuse on the street.

We’ll collect the offering now, for the support of The Sanctuary. If you have a check for your annual pledge, please mark it that way. As always, the Wood–Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non–perishable food and household items for the

Community Kitchen. The collection basket for that is by the front door. And thank you very much for your generosity.

If you wish to light a personal candle of joy or sorrow, you may step up here and I will assist you.



Eternal Spirit of life and love, we are profoundly thankful for the blessings we experience today. Would that we recognize our blessings every day and be thankful for them. Kate, please lead us in our *Hymn of Thanksgiving*. The words are in your program.

*HYMN OF THANKSGIVING*

Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day,  
For all gathered here, and those far away,  
For this time we share, with love and care,  
Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day.

*ORISON*

*Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.*

Is it possible to offer a reverse prayer? I asked myself that question this week as I learned more about the great big smelly swamp pit that Wall Street made out of our financial system. I was angry with everyone: buyers, sellers, homeowners, banks, real estate agents, stockbrokers, estimators, representatives, senators, lenders, builders, the SEC, and the Federal Reserve. For all of them, I wanted to do whatever is the opposite of pray.

I was especially angry with an administration whose watchword for eight years seemed to be, “Let the market sort it out.” The famous “rising tide” certainly did not lift all boats.

So I was thinking about a “reverse prayer,” wherein I prayed for not for their success—they didn’t need my help with that—but for their downfall. And after trying that for awhile, I realized that I was trying to hurt all those people in revenge for their having hurt so many more, including me. I also realized that I was aiming my reverse prayers too late. All the lying and lending, the buying and spending—it was all over. I realized I had to let it go and focus on the future.

And so today I pray for a secure financial future for all—even those who made obscene amounts of money in this crisis. I pray that everyone finds a way out of this very scary forest. I pray that our leaders negotiate and compromise their way to a plan that prohibits organized gambling with other people’s money. I pray that we will recognize the madness of making waaaaay too much money. I pray for a little more oversight than the market-driven financial companies can administer to themselves. I am not praying for a communist takeover of Wall Street nor a socialist-run banking system. I pray that people who buy and sell money think more communally, that they place the social good of all before the good of the company. Or themselves.

The Jewish high holy days begin at sundown tomorrow with the festival of Rosh Hashana. It’s commonly thought of as the Jewish New Year. Since it is celebrated on the first day of Tishrei, the seventh month in the Hebrew calendar. And Rosh Hashana is marked by the sounding of the *shofar*, the ram’s horn trumpet. The sound of the *shofar* is intended to awaken the listener and to alert all to the coming judgment.

In these few moments of silence, let us pray for a secure future and let us hear the sound of the *shofar* as a warning against greed and the evil of placing profit before people.

[3 *shofar blasts*]

*Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.*

Lynn Schmissrauter graces our pulpit today. She is a congregational consultant for the National Episcopal Church and the Episcopal Diocese of East Tennessee. She graduated from Vanderbilt and studied at the School of Theology at the University of the South at Sewanee.

Lynn is currently the Chief of Faculty for a national program called Fresh Start, which helps clergy and congregations navigate the challenges of transitions in pastorates.

She calls herself an “Episcopal Buddhist Progressive,” and once told me that she’d like to come to my church. So I replied with an invitation to preach. We’re very glad she could find time for us.

*SERMON: Look Out Below!*

You might be wondering why the title of my talk this morning is “Look Out Below! Spiritual Rock Climbing and Managing Change”. In a few moments I am going to ask you to think about two images – metaphors if you will (meta-furs as we say in Arkansas) – but first I want to tell you how I came to be so interested in the topic of change and the processes around life’s transitions.

The professional work that I do now involves primarily working with congregations and clergy who are experiencing transition in leadership. These transitions can be equally challenging and enriching for people in communities of common interest – like this one. It is interesting work, and has led me into a great deal of reflection on how we as a society respond to change in our lives. So – this work involves how systems deal with change.

But it is a piece of my own story - some personal changes - that really led to my interest in how we, as human beings and in human systems,

respond to change.

From 1988 to 1996, I was the Canon Pastor at the Episcopal Cathedral in Jackson, Mississippi. My job was to provide oversight to a team of clergy and lay people who pastored a congregation of over 2000 members. That's a lot of pastoral care. I did a lot of counseling – proactive counseling like pre-marital work, and reactive like intervention work with families of addicts, consultations with people in emotional and spiritual pain, working with hospice patients, and planning funeral liturgies.

What I learned in that position is that most pastoral problems and issues we dealt with had to do with changes in people's lives. The pain and anxiety that people were experiencing were brought about by some transition process – by choice, or by life coming headlong at them. For some, this pain led to great transformation, and for others it was a place where they “got stuck”,

Then I experienced it in my own life.

In 1996, after much prayer, discernment, hesitation and dating, I married my college sweetheart – a wonderful man with whom I was reunited 20 years after our romance began in college. My decision to marry Joey involved a number of significant changes – a new home, a new city, a new husband, a new church, and probably most impacting was the overnight motherhood of three very young children for whom he had been sole custodial parent.

I also experienced a serious and life threatening illness that resulted in major surgery two months before our wedding. It was an exciting and terrifying time in my life. Steven, Joe and Shelley were 5, 7 and 10 when Joey and I got married and with no children of my own, I was a confident but truly clueless new wife and mother. All the pastoral skills in the world might not have prepared me for what I was about to experience!

During our pre-marital counseling, we were reminded that we were taking a very big risk. DUH. I knew that I was loading myself up with a great deal of emotional, physical, psychological, and spiritual stress. I wavered several times, knowing that I loved this man but terrified to make so much of a move all at one time. It took me a long time to make the decision, one that I do not regret. There was a lot of letting go, a lot of mystery time that felt like walking on jello, and great joy as I found my footing.

But I did have difficulty – great difficulty – and about 18 months of it. I asked myself, “What have I done?” over and over. The first time I was alone at home with the children, I got up early and stepped out onto the deck for that first bracing cup of coffee and promptly realized that I had locked myself out of the house – with sleeping children inside. They have never let me forget that one.

Thanks to the help of friends, family, a spiritual coach, and a very good therapist here in Chattanooga, I managed to successfully navigate the path of change in my life during this time. I don't think I would recommend this to anyone, but I am glad I did it. It was the chaos that led me to the knowledge that two people committed to each other can be a wonderfully fruitful thing, and that parenting led me to be a better grown up myself.

One of the things that Joey and I talked about in our own pre-marital counseling was the number of life changes we were facing. Our counselor brought out a rating sheet for life changes and the stress associated with those changes. You may have heard about it. It is basically a numerical rating scale that assigns points for significant transition points in a person's life. We were, of course, off the scale – literally.

You may have heard about the “Life Stress Inventory”. It has to do with research carried out by Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe on psychosomatic disorders related to social readjustment. These two scientists tested 2500 males on a Navy cruiser. They discovered that

the men who scored in the top third on their rating scale had 90% more incidents of illness than those with lower scores.

Subsequent research monitored 84 medical residents. Physicians with scores of 300 or higher showed a greater risk of physical illness – in this group, 49% became ill during an 18 month period. Of those scoring between 200 and 300, only 25% became ill. And of those scoring between 100 and 200, only 9% were affected.

What this means in general terms is that humans can only tolerate a certain amount of change. And the stress of change can actually lead to physical illness. Not to mention emotional and spiritual problems. This fact can be very sobering for people who endure many transitions all at once – or even one. The same observations can apply to organizations. The more change, the more stress and the more likely the acting out or conflict.

Change is complicated and difficult to navigate. But it is a reality in life – in fact it is necessary for society to evolve. What I deal with in my work now is the systemic resistance to change. While it is necessary for us to make adjustments and movements, organizations (and individuals) constantly long for what scientists call homeostasis, or rubber band like snap back to the way things were before. We know we need it, but we often don't really want it or know how to deal with it.

We hear a lot about change these days:

- In the political realm, presidential candidates have themes around change: “A vote for me is a vote for change”; “Help us bring about change”; “We need a change and we need it now”; and so forth...
- In the religious arena, our congregational development professionals tell us that if the institutional church does not change, it will die. I tend to agree with this theory, but that

may be another topic for another day.

- There is an old joke in the Episcopal Church that goes something like this: How many Episcopalians does it take to change a light bulb? Change? We can't change that light bulb! It's been in our church for 100 years. My grandmother gave that light bulb! It has a memorial plaque on it...
- In my work with an organization here in Chattanooga called The Sanctuary, I have learned that if we do not address poverty head on and work for significant changes, we cannot make progress in the areas of education and addiction. My work at The Sanctuary is how I met Jeff and Kate Briere. Jeff and I served together as founding board members and Kate produced an original play for our first fund raiser. So society itself demands change in order for us to evolve and change.
- The fashion industry makes millions of dollars every year by introducing changes in clothing styles.
- Health professionals encourage changes in lifestyle and diet to promote changes in the patterns of heart disease, diabetes, and other life-threatening processes.

Society asks for change. Life itself gives us change. Is there a helpful way to understand it better – and deal with it in a healthy way?

The first step is to understand the difference between change and transition.

Change is the actual event: The move into the new house, the death of a loved one, the promotion to a new position, or the start of a new exercise regimen. Change is the situational.

Transition is the process around the change – what occurs before and

after the actual change. It is the three stage psychological process that people go through as they internalize and come to terms with the details of the new situation that the change brings about.

William Bridges, a consultant and educator, studied transitional management and made a long career of helping others through transitions. His work has informed – and comforted me personally and much of what I have learned I can attribute to his work and writings. Bridges explains that we must look at change as a larger process – one with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

This brings me to my first meta–fur.

Imagine that you are swinging on a trapeze. You swing along, getting the feel of the bar you are holding and the rhythm of the motion. It becomes comfortable and regular to you as you let your body move through the air. You use your legs to control your speed but you hold tightly to the trapeze bar. Close your eyes for a moment and visualize this in your mind.

Suddenly you see something disturbing but also exciting. It is another trapeze bar coming at you – and it has your name on it. What do you feel at this point in time? Exhilaration? Fear? Denial? Probably a little of all of these. Depending on the way you are psychologically wired, you might feel the challenge to grab it immediately, or just pretend it isn't there.

But you know that sooner or later, you must grab this bar. And that involves an action – a letting go. You must, at some point in time, let go of the safety and regularity of your current holding on place in order to take hold of the one coming at you.

And this means that you must spend some time – at least a moment or two – flying through the air without a grip on anything at all.

You consider your options. I'll just stay on this bar thank you very

much. No, I must grab it. When do I let go? How fast is that other bar moving? Is it possible to perhaps hold on to this one and that one at the same time? You begin the internal negotiations.

You prepare, you might pray, then you let go. You are flying through space with no hold, with no anchor, with what feels like no support. The force of natural gravity plays a part. So does the motion you have built from swinging on the first bar. But this moment in time can be a scary one while it is also thrilling.

You let yourself hurl through space towards the other bar, hoping you can find the strength to grab it. This moment seems like a lifetime. You might, if you can let go of your anxiety, even relish the freedom of the in between time. You are free, but you are also without a trapeze bar!

This period of the unknown is the essential part of the experience. In order to get to the other bar, you must let go of the first one and fling yourself through the air.

And of course there is that other bar. You must judge when it is time to grab it. Timing is important. Taking a strong hold is also important but you must try to stay as relaxed as possible in order to find the rhythm. You watch carefully, then you reach out and take the bar. You have it. You made it. You catch your breath, find your pace, begin to move your legs, and swing – again.

This image involves a three stage process – a beginning period on the first bar, a neutral zone in between, and an ending time as you grab the second bar. Dr. Bridges recommends that the healthy way to look at life's transitions – in personal experience and in organizations – is to think of it as a three stage process.

- One – an ending, losing or letting go. We must deal with our losses and we often need the most help during this period. Jesamyn West, American writer, said once, “Nothing is so

precious as what you are about to leave.”

- Two – the ungrounded and perhaps more frightening “neutral zone” when we must let go of what was before so that we can take hold of the new. The old is gone, but the new isn’t fully operational. This is when critical psychological realignments or re-patterning take place.
- Three – the holding on and finding a new rhythm; coming out of transition and making a new beginning. This is when people develop a new identity, experience a new energy, and discover the new sense of purpose that make the change begin to work.

Each of these three stages starts without the previous one’s ending. They overlap and lap back over each other sometimes.

For me, of course, the preparation was the courting, the counseling, the acquainting, the education. But when I got into our car the day after our wedding to travel to Chattanooga with the three children – and when we arrived home in the dead heat of summer to find there was no air conditioning after 7 hours drive – I experienced the flight between bars. And the 18 months of chaos and joy afterwards – that was my becoming familiar with that next trapeze bar.

My most important learning throughout all of my experience in transition and in my work with organizations in transition – is that there will be chaos. No matter how well planned, carefully discerned and perfectly orchestrated the move, there will be the chaotic times. This knowledge has saved me a great deal of subsequent heartache and worry as my parents aged, my children moved away, and I navigated career changes.

What are the three stages of your most recent transition in life – at home, in school, at work? What stage are you in right now? What must end in order for your change to happen? What transformation

or maturity have you achieved as a result? Transitions do, after all, begin with endings.

Of course, not every transition gives us the opportunity for preparation.

There are many types of change, but they can all be classified in two basic categories – planned and unplanned. Both of these involve the three stages of transition, but their outset is very different.

Some examples of planned change are marriage, having children, changing careers, changing places of residents, or sending children away to college. You probably have your own examples.

Unplanned changes might include death, layoffs, disabilities or other health problems, or financial collapse. These are the phone calls in the middle of the night – or what comes on the television screen when we see the words “Special Report”.

Some changes can be both planned and unplanned – like divorce – depending on where you are in the relationship.

Take a moment to consider the most recent change in your life. Was it a planned change or an unplanned change? Can you identify the three stages?

Think about a change you are considering. What might you need to do to navigate your “trapeze” experience?

That is where my second meta–fur comes in. It has to do with rock climbing.

Now I will tell you right off the bat that I am not a rock climber. I have been on a climbing wall complete with safety harness and holding partner – and it was a completely exhilarating experience to take the high wall and make it to the top then lower myself back to

the earth with friends cheering. That is the extent of my climbing experience.

But I learned something about rock climbing and was reminded of it a few months ago. I was talking with a friend about my recent rotation off the board of The Sanctuary. It was the right time, but difficult for me to let go. My friend reminded me that as long as I remembered the rules of rock climbing I would be okay.

Do you know the rock climbing rule? Three points of contact. If you are going to successfully navigate a rock face, you must always maintain three points where you have contact with a holding point. In other words, only one of your limbs – one hand or one foot – can be free to search for the next hold at one time. You will lose your stability if you have two limbs hanging free – which might be disastrous.

Think of these three holding points as the necessary supports for your transition. And think of the rock face as your life. You climb, you stop, you climb, you stop. Sometimes you have to lower yourself and start over. Sometimes you hang on and breathe while you think about your next move. But you do have to move.

What are your three holding points?

I propose that there are indeed three necessary holding points or anchors for our own navigation through the changes and chances of life – they are our community, our own sense of self, and the beliefs and values that ground us. These are different for everyone.

Our community is that group of people who support us – friends, family, co-workers, spouses or partners. Think about who your community is. Whose community are you in?

Our own sense of self provides us with another holding point. Do you know your own sense of limits? Do you know what you believe

and can you stand up for it? Can you disagree with others and yet stay connected to them?

Holding point three is a very personal one. What calls you into creativity? What grounds you? Consider what beckons you to grow and change...it might be a person, or a state of being, or a spiritual practice. In what can you be at rest and also motivated?

Change isn't a bad thing – but it is a challenging thing. And the moments of real stability in our lives are fleeting. Change is the norm. Knowing how it affects us, and how we might better understand it, might help us manage it better with less anxiety.

My work in organizations led me into the study of the work of Rabbi Edwin Friedman, who popularized what Dr. Murray Bowen called systems theory. In this theory, we can look at families and organizations – or any entity, including the human body, as a system of other systems with everything connected. Friedman believed, as I do, that systems become open during times of transition. And the average period of open-ness is about 18 months. Does this fit for you and your experience of transition if you think about it as the three part process?

The really good news about change is that we are not alone in it. Our community and our beliefs and values can be our holding points. We will all continue to experience those transitions – planned and unplanned. As you experience them consider one last image. My friend and mentor Ed Bacon recently reminded me of this. When famed test pilot Chuck Yeager broke the sound barrier, a reporter asked him what it was like. He replied that just before he broke it, the cockpit shook violently, then as soon as he went through the barrier, there was a calmness and peace in the aircraft.

Perhaps this is what makes change so frightening some many. The cockpit might shake, the palms might sweat, we might resist and misunderstand the change we are being called into.

But this often happens at a time when it is terribly important – when we are being called - to seek another perspective or position.

No experience is wasted.

I leave you with a quote from Charles Du Bos, French critic, who said, “The important thing is this: to be able at any moment to sacrifice what we are for what we would become.”

What do you want to become? Where are you in life’s transitions today? Are you swinging happily on your bar, are you hurling through space, or are you grabbing the next bar and starting something new? Regardless, the one thing you can count on is that it is not a permanent condition.

Peace be with you in your journeys.

*HYMN 146*

*Soon the Day Will Arrive*

*EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE*

We extinguish this flame,  
but not the light of its truth  
the warmth of this community  
nor the fire of our commitment.  
These we carry in our hearts  
and share with all the world.

*POSTLUDE*

*The Old Refrain*