"What We Dread May Save Us"
a sermon given by Patrick McLaughlin
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Terrorists. Guns. Climate change. Winter storms. Summer storms. There is so much that we fear—sometimes with good reason.

H.P. Lovecraft wrote "The oldest human emotion is fear, and the oldest fear is fear of the unknown." Immigrants. Islam. The future. We have lists of things we're afraid of, with names for each, as if they were species of beetles, labeled and categorized in rows. Ablutophobia - Fear of washing. Barophobia - Fear of gravity. Dendrophobia - Fear of trees. Gnosiophobia - Fear of knowledge. The list is vast. We are afraid of everything that is real, and many things that aren't. What are your fears? Do you know them?

Sometimes even talking about fear can make us anxious, or fearful. If you start to feel that, please look at that litany against fear. I know it can help.

Unrestrained fear is the enemy of progress, and of peace. It keeps us from dealing with each other, or with our own selves. It is used by dictators, demagogues and tyrants to control populations. It keeps us from doing things we really want to do.

Each of us fears, whether we know it or not. We may refuse to acknowledge our fear, refuse to see it or label it or even think about it for… well, out of fear that doing so will make it worse. We become afraid of fear itself!

Fear can be crippling. My father's job took us overseas. Not long after my thirteenth birthday, we climbed the Leaning Tower of Pisa. The doorways open out onto wide balconies—and there are no railings. As my brother and sister stepped out to look around, I froze, and stepped back into the stairwell. Had I needed to, I'm not sure that I could have taken a step out to grab one of them from going over the edge.

I fear heights—acrophobia. Now, I've discovered an odd fact; I'm wary of all heights, but I can walk along a cliff or climb a tree. But buildings and bridges can trigger a knotted stomach and clenched fists. It's human-made heights I really distrust. I haven't found the name for that one, yet. But I've learned to deal with it.

I will face my fear./ I will permit it to pass over me and through me./ And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path./ Where the fear has gone there will be nothing./ Only I will remain.

I no longer leave fingerprints in steering wheels when I drive over a tall bridge (though sometimes Barbara still asks, "are you alright?"). I don't know where that fear comes from. Fear isn't rational. But it can be funny. Here's one more; arachi-bu-tyr-o-phobia: the fear of getting peanut butter stuck to the roof of your mouth.

There is a fear that most of us share that is quite real. It's one of the very, very few certain things in the universe—and I'm not talking about death or taxes.

I'm talking about change. It's easy to say. And I know how scary real change is.

I was 48 when the call to ministry pounced on me—it freaked me out, but was utterly compelling. When I told my wife what I was considering, Barbara's first words were "Well, maybe with your next wife, because I'm not sure I'm cut out to be a minister's wife." (she very fairly observes in her defense, that she had only woken minutes before I dropped this bombshell on her—I can understand how it might evoke such a reaction.)

We'd been married for 20 years, and I'd spent the last 14 years as a full-time at-home parent, homeschooling our sons. In about 15 minutes—from the time I heard my call to that conversation, nearly everything important to me was threatened with radical change. No, that's not right—the danger wasn't change, the danger was loss. In that moment, the possibility was very real to me that I might lose my marriage, my family, screw up my kids… and still have to pursue ministry.

Change means possible loss. Naturally, we recoil. Who wants loss? Loss means pain and grief. Thanks, I'll pass. But that's only one possibility. Change also offers gain, growth, and joy. Not changing sounds good—but a synonym for not-changing is stagnation. Who wants to be that fetid, stagnant pond?

In my case, I went home and I apologized to all the people who had—for years—suggested that I should be a minister. I had known better—they were crazy. I had had no interest or desire to do that… to do—this. But they'd been right; they had seen things I hadn't seen—or hadn't wanted to see.

My sons are now 18 and going on 21. It won't be long before their lives change radically and they move out. We'll celebrate—successfully raising a child is an accomplishment—but it's one we'll also mourn. Change is not an unalloyed blessing, even when it's good, even when it's necessary —even when you want it.

Change is hard. It can be scary and traumatic. And it's inevitable. That is one of the great insights of the Buddha: "Everything changes, nothing remains without change."

When my home congregation consciously started making the transition from being a small congregation to being a mid-sized one, we knew we had a lot of work to do—and not enough people to do it all. We needed to figure out how to do more with the people and resources we had.

Their board had 11 members—almost 10% of the membership—and meetings could go on for hours… and hours. It reviewed decisions that committees had already considered and made, and then, essentially rubber-stamped them. The task force that redesigned our governance proposed shrinking the board from 11 to 5, and giving more authority to committees and to a council of committees. I was board president at the time, and once the board agreed that this was a good idea, it became my job to present the proposal to the congregation—and, when it passed, to implement it.

I heard a lot of fear about that. I'm not saying the fear was baseless; our congregations are precious; people who have dedicated decades to them are justly concerned about significant changes. It's now been over five years since they implemented that change, the congregation is vibrant, growing, and no one wants to go back. Filling board positions is now a smaller and easier job. The board is happier, and doing its work better and faster. It has become more transparent, not less. The day-to-day life of the fellowship is in the hands of more people—the committees and their council. The board isn't micromanaging, and it's not asked to review every decision and expenditure. Best of all, we freed six active, key members to do other things, to create and run new groups, to build new ministries helping the local community, and to focus on growing.

In the movie, Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, Indiana has to cross a deep chasm. His father is dying and the only hope is for Indiana to get across that chasm. Indiana has to have faith—to trust—that the instructions to step out into the air won't result in the obviously deadly fall. I hated that scene. I don't like heights. The idea of that step made me queasy. But I also hated it because it suggests faith is blind faith—don't test, don't trust what you can see. It's a model of irrational faith. But I also love it. Because we have a knee-jerk hostility to the very idea of faith, and that's a mistake.

Real faith isn't certainty. It's trust. What you know is knowledge, not faith. Real faith is about doubt and trust. It's about "I'm not sure. I've explored this, but I'm not certain. I suspect it might be, and I have doubts, but I'm trusting that it's so." That's good faith. Trust. Real faith is what you have where you actually have doubts.

So I love the scene where Indiana Jones steps out over the abyss—even while it makes me sick. He has doubts. He's a rationalist, he's not a blind believer. But it's important and the only way he sees to get across—where he has to go, is to trust and take the risk.

Real change feels that way. It's scary. There's a risk. Of course, as a good UU, I sit back and grumble—Jones should have scattered dirt over the abyss first, to see if there was an invisible bridge. And hey, just what is that invisible bridge made of?

But that's not the point. It's not real, it's a movie—and it's a metaphor. Remember change happens. It happens whether we want it or not. We can stand on a rock in the the river, and feel dry and secure—but we're stuck on that rock, we're not going anywhere, and if there's a flood, we're in deep trouble. The trick is to make choices that are risky, with open eyes, aiming for objectives that are worth the risks. You may well get there—or find that, part way, you can see other options you'd never have imagined staying put.

You may find stepping stones below the surface—you'll get your feet wet, but you'll get across, and have new possibilities. You may find that you actually can swim, and rather than needing to sit on the rock, you rather like becoming a strong swimmer, and seeing where the river will take you. In 1920, the Universalist minister L.B. Fisher wrote that Universalists were frequently badgered about what they believed, where they stood. His tart—and accurate—reply was "We do not stand at all, we move."

We have given up secure perches, firm rocks, over and over, to on to better things. This is part of what Gandhi meant when he said, "Be the change you want to see in the world." No one can promise it won't be scary. It will be. There may be sharp rocks below. But I can tell you that the rewards are real too, and worth the risk.

I found something I need to do—ministry—something I feel I must do. But if you'd asked me back then, it was the last thing I wanted to do. Doing it threatened everything I'd worked for, the well being of others, my own security in the world. The risks were real. But the rewards have been great already, getting off that nice safe rock.

In her book, Small Wonder, Barbara Kingsolver wrote, "The changes we dread most may contain our salvation." I delight in reading her use of the language. But she's very attentive to the world and attuned to what's going on in it. This is a beautifully bit of wisdom; "The changes we dread most may contain our salvation."

Does that not capture where we as a society are—where we as a species are—today? We know we cannot continue living as we do. We can count the years left where we can use oil at all—much less in the way we have been for a century—and while we don't know the exact number of years, we know it's not many, and that they come at a great price. Our whole society rests on oil, so we know that everything is going to change a lot. We here in North America use more, per capita, than any other society on Earth; we're going to feel this change. We know that the sooner we make those changes, the better off we and the rest of the world will be. And… we fight it. We resist. Even when we know what we want—a cleaner world, with safer energy that doesn't create the pollution or do the harm that fossil fuels do. Even when we know we'd be better off. Even when we know we have to. We resist. We fear change and loss.

"The changes we dread most may contain our salvation."

The congregation I came out of is an example. Some really resisted change. But there are now two services; membership has grown steadily and worship is heavily attended. There were people who fought a second service—as if we'd offered to perform an amputation without anesthesia.

The things they feared didn't happen. They still saw their friends. More people came. Fear of what might happen made the monster of risk under the bed, the bogeyman of change in the closet, seem huge and terrifying. Once in the rearview mirror, it wasn't very impressive at all. And yet, while it was happening, those fears were real, and needed to be acknowledged, and held. In those moments, more than ever, we need to feel love draped around us, particularly as we sense the whole tragedy of life and death, and fear the consequences of carelessness and mistakes. They do happen. But what we were acknowledging was that the sacred can't be contained. It has to move. It can't be sustained inside a building. Buildings crumble. The spirit lives on. Our faith is in people, and in their possibilities, and our faith is in change, in changing for the better.

In our lives, as individuals and as communities, change is scary. But change is inevitable. Change is opportunity. Change will happen; we can't stop it. But if you take risks with your eyes open, not letting fear blind you—with worthwhile objectives—you can make some choices about the change that will happen. If you embrace it, you can direct it; you don't end up a victim of what happens when your resistance is overrun.

I know this—I fought my call to ministry for a while. But I decided to embrace it, to run with it, and to ride that monster called change. It's been a wild ride. When I stopped fighting, I suddenly had back all the energy I had been spending in resisting. The scary, frightening things didn't happen to me. Barbara mulled it over for a time—encouraging me to explore the crazy idea of ministry. She agreed it's the right thing for me to do; and she is figuring out what it means for her. It means change. It's not all bad; she now has a perfect answer for door-to-door evangelists—"My husband's a minister" is, apparently, incredibly effective. She also realized that she'll never be asked again to serve on a congregation's board of trustees. Barbara was asked several times—and declined for various reasons. But she knew she'd probably be asked again. The last time, however when she declined, she told me, "You know, I realize that I won't be asked this again…" with a sense of loss, even as she acknowledged a certain sense of liberation. No change comes without some cost. She has since gone on to join boards at the district level; losing one possibility, she moved onto another way of serving our faith.

Our tradition affirms caution, but only a little. Had Servetus been more cautious, he might have avoided the stake—but we might never have had the unbiblical idea of the Trinity so ably debunked. Had Francis Davíd been cautious, he'd have remained a Lutheran bishop, and Transylvanian Unitarianism might have died at birth. And if Jefferson, Washington, and Lincoln, or Susan B. Anthony and Martin Luther King, Jr. had been more cautious, it's easy to imagine what might not have happened.

Each of us has fears—just as each of them did—and each of us has the choice, each day, to face our fears and control them or to be possessed by them. You, and I get to choose to be a light in the darkness, or to sit, afraid in the dark, cursing the darkness.

Change is inevitable, Buddha told us. Ecclesiastes tells us that there is a season for everything. Life is the art of living well with change, and directing it to its best possible end. That's why Gandhi instructed, "Be the change you want to see in the world."

Our religion affirms hope and love. It insists that good changes are possible. And while our fears may be of real things—bad things that could happen—it is when we act out of love and in the hope and expectation of the good that we can do, that the Beloved Community that Martin Luther King, and others, called us to, becomes real and tangible. I urge you to embrace, and to guide change; to boldly be, in love, the change we want—and need—to see, in our lives, communities, and world.

May it be so, amen, and blessed be.