

ARE UNITARIANS OPEN TO CHANGE? Eric Stevenson

Last Sunday after Fellowship, Davey, Colin and I had an important conversation with a visitor looking for a religious sea change. He had submitted his world view to the Religious Preference web site and Unitarian came up for his recommended religion of choice. But he could not see what it was in a religion without doctrines and dogmas that would sustain his private search for, and practice of a post modern spirituality. We looked to Davey who has been a Unitarian since birth in his big UU congregation in the States. Davey's answer was definitive! The Unitarian commitment to the life changes involved in progressive religious thought is not only a private one. **It is shared** It is the sharing that makes us tick.

But there is something else that draws Aussie Unitarians together. I suspect that most Australian Unitarians (and some American ones I know!) are not dyed-in-the-wool like Davey. Most of us have had the experience of leaving a traditional congregation for a free thinking one, or at least of having changed from the doctrinaire religious belief in which they were brain washed. We have left that world behind and all now embrace the name "Spirit of Life". What does that imply? As we have stated in our Opening Words this automatically commits us to a living, developing, growing, evolving and consequently changing spiritual journey. That is why I felt so at home when I came here. I was in the process of leaving a congregation in which the Spirit was old and grey. If it wasn't already dead it was dying! The doctrinal system was a closed book. An exploration of a divergent world view was a no-no! The raising of doubt about authoritarian beliefs was a no-no. How then did we arrived here?

For most of us it is a sacred story. ? It has a lot to do with a concept called "change readiness" which has been written about by my friends Steve and Stephanie Barlow in their book, "People Get Ready", Redequip P/L, 2011. They speak of the big implications for change in organisations, but the same applies to individuals and groups like us. In particular it applies to the gigantic challenge which progressive religious thinking and living presented to those of us whose ideas had already been culturally moulded and traditionally indoctrinated in orthodoxy.

My journey began in what the Barlows' call the **Pre-Contemplative Stage**. I had no realization as a young person that faith could be a living thing which was open to new circumstances and increasing knowledge. I did not question a belief system that was based on outdated thought forms of an outmoded primitive culture. I thought my religion had a monopoly on truth. I felt comfortable; I was satisfied with my fixed set of beliefs and I felt that spiritually I had arrived. Others may have been so effectively indoctrinated that they were convinced they were in possession of ultimate truth, that what they had been taught was indisputably correct, and that to contradict or contravene what they had learned was blasphemous. They would most likely rely on the "experts" to instruct them if any changes were necessary. Not willing to risk change, most of these people were frozen in pre-contemplation. This virginal spiritual state is somewhat hard for committed progressives to tolerate once they have taken responsibility to open their minds to the questions and doubts in the next stage.

For those of us who had spent a long time in Pre-Contemplation the next step was important. Step 2 was **Contemplation**. During this stage we all probably felt pressures – both positive and negative. We were driven by life's critical incidents and inner yearnings to be intellectually honest. Be responsible for your own destiny! Be free enough to think for

yourself! Be prepared to learn from science and technology and modern discovery as well as from the essence of ancient religion! And as we listened to all of those clarion calls, we heard about Unitarianism!

We have already alluded to the disregard which “frozen” *Pre-contemplatives* had for the unscientific and out of date cultural themes on which their faith was based. But on the Unitarian journey the contribution of modern science and culture were said to be more important. Unitarianism had a preference for a post modern interpretation of (and if necessary disregard for) religious doctrine. It had a critical attitude towards ecclesiastical authoritarianism, primitive world views, mindless contemporary “wisdom”. All of this led the Unitarian forefathers and foremothers to challenge many of the old doctrines and dogmas, and to dispense with them. Max reminded us in his address that in the early 1800’s Ralph Waldo Emerson questioned, among many other Christian beliefs, the doctrine of original sin, and opened the way to a panentheism in Unitarianism. But there were more changes ahead for the fledgling religion. Our ANZUUA president, Peter Ferguson reminded us at the Brisbane Conference that most Unitarians were no longer followers of a theistic Deity. But our anticipated loss of a friendly relationship with the interventionist Father God of our childhood is something to consider. This is particularly the case if we are called upon to endure a serious life crisis. Such a crisis might demand emotional and spiritual sustenance of a super human order when the perfectly normal response to such a crisis is to regress so as to cope with the ordeal. But most Unitarians have apparently learned to live with it. From Emerson to Ferguson is a long time for a church to be in the ***pre-contemplative Stage!!***

Other negatives are worthy of consideration. A gay sexual orientation was preached against in my former church, but “coming out” about my rebellious beliefs with loved ones and church associates would have been just as difficult. How and when would I do it? What would a public change in my religious outlook do to my relationships with my conservative friends and family members? How would I cope with life crises without an assurance of security, protection and healing which my childhood religious beliefs gave me?

Having counted the cost of Change, some Contemplatives regress to the Pre-Contemplative Stage. For them it is more attractive and more sensible to do so. Incredibly, I have known of abused married partners who have done this and stayed with their abusive husbands. I suspect that many priests and ministers in conservative congregations are taking a similar position. Others may have privately resolved their doubts, sufficiently answered their questions to themselves and decided to stop adventuring into the next stage – **Preparation**.

This is the stage which a lot of people neglect at their peril. My grandson did not like his work so he contemplated changing his job, went straight into **Action Stage** and resigned! He failed to Prepare, and finished up unemployed! Backsliding converts in evangelistic campaigns do this; and it is also the cause of the “revolving door” phenomenon in the popular fundamentalist churches. Some of the new people who have come into our Fellowship but whom we have not seen again do it too. They did not **prepare** before trying to join the Fellowship. Preparation for us involved exploration of the degrees of freedom to be found in a variety of other faith communities, extensive reading of progressive religious literature, the search for a safe place where there was mutual respect for each other’s stage of growth, a fellowship of goodwill in which it was more important what you do than what you believe, and our willingness and ability to give Spirit of Life our full allegiance.

Action is the fourth stage. Many choose not to enter it, or to do a limited version of it. The negatives become more significant as we contemplate the consequences. . Action often involves forming an alliance with new and possibly unpopular associates, making a public stand for honest scholarship, declaring an open respect for sources of truth no matter from where or from whom truth may be sought (My friend Jenny chose a Buddhist reading for her ordination in a mainline denomination this year), a disassociation from hypocritical situations in which creedal vows are made contrary to one's changed beliefs(Sue is an ordained deaconess in the Sydney Anglican diocese and refuses to recite the Apostles Creed) , and even the defiance of customs and culturally approved habits which offend one's newfound or enhanced values of unconditional love and social justice. (Clifford Longley, commentator on religious affairs in the British media has recently come out with a statement that the requirement of miracles performed by candidates for sainthood in the Catholic Church is ridiculous.)

The longer that list of changed action becomes, the more it is realized how much support and assistance would be required to remain "changed". Helpfully, for those who dare to go there, the Change model leads us to the **Maintenance Stage** (p 39). The changes in progressive religious thought and action, demanded by our celebration of Life and our observance of our seven Unitarian principles will never end. I therefore venture to say that in our situation, necessary maintenance in any or all of the stages lasts forever. Probably the reason why the mainline world religions have survived for so long is because they have developed tightly controlled maintenance systems which their true believers are compelled to avail themselves of. But for Unitarians, a religious regime of doctrines, dogmas and hierarchies which have caused some churches to stagnate in an erroneous stage of "revealed truth" is not for us. Thankfully, our disdain for that kind of spiritual stagnation has not blinded our leaders to the virtues of religion's maintenance liturgies. Vocal and instrumental music, poetry, sculpture, narrative, architecture and dramatic art are all waiting to be further exploited as maintenance tools for our denomination, for this Fellowship and for the world wide progressive religious movement. Probably more importantly, and not to be overlooked, is the other orthodox maintenance strategy - the weekly opportunity of meeting face to face with fellow believers and eating with them (even though the Eucharist consists of a sip and a crumb!). This is obviously a sustaining influence in keeping traditionalists on the straight and narrow. If the lifestyle required by our seven principles consists of remaining faithful to them, it will be a life of sacrifice and self-giving with not a little self-doubt and uncertainty thrown in. That kind of human existence will demand continual human support something like church on Sundays, even more so when support from the supernatural realm is in question. But we are not talking about doing church. We are talking about what Davey said was the hallmark of Unitarianism – regularly sharing our personal quest for Life's meaning with each other. There is also a growing opportunity for finding such human support in the social media. I am grateful to Jan Tendys for promoting this medium among us on the internet. Therefore while we are developing the humanities for progressive religious maintenance let us not forsake "the gathering of ourselves together" as St Paul advised the early Christians, who incidentally were also progressives in their day.

In the same breath may I also assert that for fully committed, *active* Unitarians the Barlows' sixth stage called Termination should not apply to us. For the sake of ourselves, our visitors and each other, we have to stay like our pioneers in **Action Maintenance Mode**. The only remaining positions open to us are regression to any one of the previous four stages. And

there, it is possible to stagnate, not terminate!! But it is better to maintain the zeal of our pioneers. The Spirit of Life exemplified by them gave them the courage to die for their commitment to change. The repeated lighting of our Chalice flame is among other things a maintenance symbol of the challenge they have left to us.

As I have already forewarned, this cannot possibly be the end. The purpose of the journey we have charted is not to arrive at the ultimate truth about Life, but to sustain our travelling in pursuit of it. As humankind's sensitivities continue to evolve, as information technology advances, as knowledge increases, and as the universe changes and develops, new progressive religious thought and action will be open to us. If that is so, there is a prior question which must be asked in regard to our being ready for change. It is not so much a question as to our readiness to come to Fellowship on Sundays, although that is the nature of the path we take. It is rather a question as to our willingness to share a life long commitment to changefulness within that Fellowship. We are forever assigned to a re-working of the Change Model as each new issue confronts us.

CLOSING WORDS

May we learn to accept the things we cannot change.

May we recognise the things within us and around us that need to change.

May we have the wisdom and honesty to choose the most important contribution we can make to changing the changeable,

May we realistically assess our strength, abilities and resources needed to take on that responsibility,

May we prepare ourselves for doing so,

May we accept the advice and co-operation of critical and like minded friends,

May we respond to the challenge,

May we never give up doing what we have to do.