

Living with Change – Discovering our Outer Limits

Late last year I sat with a man whose wife had just died. Suddenly and without any warning. A brain aneurism. Shaking his head in disbelief he said, “We’d been married fourteen years. She was everything I wanted. I just can’t believe she’s gone”. A couple, both with mental illnesses, hobbling together life on a disability pension, finding dignity; often facing hospitalization but each one knowing that at least one person was in their corner. Hollywood romances had nothing on this and all I could do for this beautiful man was shake my head too, and in that moment share in his dark valley of disbelief.

Change.

Whether welcome or not it is an inseparable part of earthly existence. We often think of the changes we should make, would like to make, the ones that others expect us to make. We think less about the changes that are made to us; the unwelcome changes that arrive like uninvited visitors knocking on our door in the middle of the night.

Living in the hills at this time of the year means contemplating the possibility of bushfire; the possible annihilation of everything you hold dear; of every painting or picture carefully placed on the wall; of every tree planted; of every project lovingly nurtured into life. This is change in one of its most swift and ruthless and brutal forms. And we continue to hope and pray for those living with the effects of the '09 fires.

But in less extreme ways change is visited upon us daily; we age and our health fluctuates; organizational frameworks are constantly being negotiated as we are located and relocated in our various roles; babies are born and loved ones die; relationships end and new ones begin. And although we try to avoid the change that is visited upon us – the change that is not on our terms – it is perhaps this kind of change that teaches us the most. It is the uninvited change that forces us to set in place the outer limits of what matters.

Through the horrors of war individuals and nations have tried to establish the outer limits of what is acceptable, articulated in treaties such as the Geneva Convention. And when these are breached, something profound is lost. When partnerships fail, in a state of anger and bitterness, couples risk abandoning their outer limits or move them to the point where the dignity of all parties is undermined. It is often in a place of destitution, places where we have lost sight of our outer limits that we turn to religion and spirituality. I think this is because the core business of wisdom traditions is to help us navigate change while keeping in focus the outer limits of what matters to us – the outer limits that define who we are and who we seek to be. Engaging in this wrestling match is surely the central task of the truth-seeker.

Whether we turn to the Buddhist teachings on impermanence to understand the changing nature of reality, or meditate on the words of Jesus as ‘heaven and earth pass away’ (Lk.21:33), our quest for enlightenment-salvation will require that we question and challenge and continue to reflect upon the outer limits of what truly matters. What helps

you keep sight of your outer limits? For me, when faced with loss and tragedy I turn to the words of the prophet Micah:

To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8)

Grace & Peace,

James