

A Way of Saying Yes
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North Universalist Chapel Society

Ready or not—here I come
Who shall I say is calling?

—Michael Hedges, Ready or Not

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. The title of this morning's reflection is A Way of Saying Yes. It is a reflection on the power of acceptance, our acceptance of change.

There is a bridge made out of flowers in a place called Shelburne Falls and if you cross it, you become a butterfly. You shed whatever chrysalis you carry and you unfold new and boldly colored wings, having never seen them—not even once before. All is change in this good season. Are you ready? ...because change happens, whether we want it to or not. "Are you ready for change?" is not really the question. The real question is: "Can we accept it? Can we accept the changes that are coming?" I ask because acceptance is a way of saying, "yes." So, I suppose that the deepest question is "Are you ready to say yes to life?"

I used to think it far more meaningful to say 'no' to things in life—to resist, even when resistance is meaningless. Like, if I made a serious mistake, I would try to cancel what I had done through a kind of resistance. I would say to myself, "No, no, no, no, no..." Although I was clearly, the serious mistake I made, unfortunately, did not correct itself. The problem that I had created didn't go away.

Sometimes, we make the serious mistake...and we fall into the muddy hole or get stuck for hours or for lifetimes. In our great efforts to be heroic, we make the tragic error...of letting the groundball roll on by us. We fail to make the play...leading, sometimes, to awful consequences. We wanted to be heroes. We thought we would be famous but somehow we come up short. We wanted to be stars but then, we fall down from the heavens and we flamed out in the atmosphere...and no one even saw. We burned so bravely and so boldly but the sky was cloudy and it was drizzling and not that many people were looking up. Even if they had, they wouldn't have seen us. And there's nothing wrong with that...so long as we don't give up on the fight. Janis Ian, a poet, writes,

Stars, they come and go
They come fast or slow
They go like the last light of the sun
All in a blaze
And all you see is glory...

She tell us that,
People lust for fame
Like athletes in a game

We break our collarbones
And come up swinging

Do you know the type? Do you know those folks? Are you one of them—the brazen ones, the bashful ones...the ones who fight fiercely and foolishly enough to never care about the odds. They just accept them, come what may...and undeterred and unafraid and undaunted, they just keep on pushing on. They keep on striving. Setback after setback, some of us just don't give up. Even when we're down, we come up swinging. We rise up singing—even when our serious mistakes are public.

It's so much easier to get up again when no one knows you've fallen down, when no one sees the bruises on your knee. There is no risk of vulnerability. We can manage our discretion. We can control the flow of information at the source. In other words, when no one sees us fall, we get to choose (or, at least, we think we get to choose) how vulnerable we are. We think we get to choose but it's not that simple.

When we fall down publicly, there's nothing that we can do. We are guilty as charged and we have to accept the consequences and by those consequences, we are fundamentally transformed. I remember the Boston Red Sox baseball game back in 1986...when a gently hit groundball dribbled through Bill Buckner's defenses...and the whole world knew immediately what had happened. His life had changed. Never would it go back to what it was before.

There is a bridge made out of flowers in a place called Shelburne Falls and if you cross it, you become a butterfly...and sometimes that's good and sometimes that's bad...and most of the time, we can't control the outcome. We can prepare for it. We can practice...but we are never ready when the unexpected happens, when we make a serious mistake. And by such things, we are transformed. Immediately and instantaneously, we pass the point of return. Life changes and we have to accept that change.

We can resist. We can say, like did, "No, no, no, no, no!" but it won't make any difference. Sooner or later, we have to accept what has happened. We have to say 'yes' to life—even when it's hard...especially when it's hard. Change is inevitable. It's how we deal with change that really matters. You know that saying, right?

Change is inevitable but growth is optional.

We can resist change if we choose to but our resistance might not be meaningful because we're gonna shed the chrysalis either way. The wings are coming. It's our choice, though, whether use them. It's up to us whether we fall or fly.

I came across a TedTalk by Brene Brown that I really appreciate. The talk was called Listening to Shame. Primarily, this talk was not directed at the times that we fall down in private. It was directed at the public moments, the ones we can't hide from scrutiny. Central to the talk was that famous quote by Teddy Roosevelt, the "Man in the Arena" quote. Apparently, it is quite well known. What he said was this:

It is not the critic who counts. It is not the man who sits and points out how the doer of deeds could have done things better and how he falls and stumbles. The credit goes to the man in the arena whose face is marred with dust and blood and

sweat. But when he's in the arena, at best, he wins, and at worst, he loses, but when he fails, when he loses, he does so daring greatly.

I don't think that there is anything more daring than choosing to become a butterfly, to be not ashamed of your wings (just because nobody else seems to have them), to be not proud of them either but to allow yourself to be lifted...but to allow your soul...to be lifted up...by the delicate defying of gravity...the we call flight. And we fly when we accept the truth of our lives whatever happens, come what may. Sometimes, the most radical thing you can do is to accept the truth that's right in front of you...even when it means you'll get stuck in the mud.

Thirty-nine years ago this week, on St. Patrick's Day in 1983, me and my friends from high school figured out how to break the law...how to break the rules, really, the high school rule about showing up for class. Thursday morning on March 17th in 1983, we wrote each other notes to get out of school. I wrote one for Mike. Mike wrote one for Sean. Sean wrote one for Rob. Rob wrote one for Jim. Jim wrote one for Willie and Willie wrote one for me. We turned them in to the attendance officer and we all took the day off from school. We drove up to New York City in Willie's van. It was pretty awesome. We stopped off at White Castle on Route 9, a couple of miles before the Garden State Parkway. White Castle is where they sold those tiny, little cheeseburgers in the tiny little boxes for \$0.72 each. Murder burgers, we used to call them...because they'd make your stomach hurt if you ate to many of them.

We ordered them by the gross one time. We were going away for the weekend. So, we ordered twelve dozen, two dozen each. That's how we rolled back then. Thirty-nine years ago this week, we were just taking a day trip. So, I'm sure we didn't get that many. But I'm sure we got a lot. It was fun to eat them and then throw the boxes around in the back of the van. We'd reach our destination and slide the door open upon arrival and the boxes would tumble out. They'd fall inelegantly on ground. We cleaned them up, of course, but it wasn't the makings of a good first impression...not that we cared that much.

Thirty-nine years ago this week, on St. Patrick's Day, we stole out of school. We escaped and drove up to New York City. We wanted to people watch. So, we headed out to McSorley's. Word was that McSorley's was THE place to best for St. Pat's. We drove in and found a place to park and we set out on a secret adventure. None of our parents knew where we were—which wasn't the wisest decision—but we figured we'd be home soon enough. It was only going to be a day trip.

The parade was lovely. Lots of fun but it was crowded. To see everything, we climbed the stairs in front of somebody's apartment building. So, we had a good view. The parade was uneventful but not at all disappointing. It was delightful, actually, the part of it we saw. Average marching bands and floats and phalanxes... The color guards from competing high schools, cheerleading teams and the like...maybe the Rotarians or the Elks... We couldn't tell from where we were but it was clear that they were proud.

There were a lot of groups, different clubs and teams and such. Network TV stations were covering it—ABC and NBC were there...and there was a WPIX affiliate.

Their camera trucks were stationed here and there—strategically, so they didn't get in the way of all of the floats and festivities.

Before it got too late, we headed back to Willie's van and took off for home. We wanted to be on time for things. We didn't want to get into any trouble, didn't want to attract attention to ourselves didn't want to rouse suspicions by being late. I can't remember what happened when we got home. It's such a blur after all these years but I think we just went to Willie's. That would have read most logically to our parents. Me and Mike and Sean and Rob and Jim and Willie were all in a band. Mark was in the band too but he graduated a year before the rest of us.

Anyway, a bunch of parents greeted us, asked about school that day. We joked around and avoided their questions as well as we could but then they cornered us. One of the parents asked, "Whose steps were you guys sitting on? Whose house was that?" We were stunned. We tried to act confused, like we didn't understand but the parents weren't buying it. "The stairs on that apartment building...by McSorley's. We saw you guys on the TV news. All of us did."

There were thousands of people there that day. The crowd was just enormous...and the TV cameras focused in on us. It was like, somehow, they knew that we weren't supposed to be there...so they filmed us. We were busted. We were all totally busted. There was nothing we could do or say without stepping in it...and it was deep. We were all right there, stuck in the mud.

This is the season for it. The mud is so thick out where I live. It's unbelievable. There's no way around it. No matter where you step, you just have to accept the consequences. You're gonna lose a shoe. That's all there is to it.

We had made a serious mistake. We cut out of school and we drove up to New York City and we got found out. It was actually funny. Our folks clearly saw how much fun we were having and, fortunately that actually made them feel pretty good. We were all in a whole lot of trouble—don't get me wrong—but there was no shame in it. All we were was guilty...and we were ok with that. We thought it was pretty cool, actually.

It goes back to what Brene Brown was saying in her TedTalk. She talked about the difference between guilt and shame. She said,

The thing to understand about shame is [that shame is] not guilt. Shame is a focus on self, guilt is a focus on behavior. Shame is "I am bad." Guilt is "I did something bad." How many of you [she continues], if you did something that was hurtful to me, would be willing to say, "I'm sorry. I made a mistake?" How many of you would be willing to say that? Guilt: I'm sorry. I made a mistake. Shame: I'm sorry. I am a mistake.

The willingness to apologize is an aspect of acceptance. It is that taking of responsibility for ones own actions. Guilt enables acceptance. Shame disables acceptance. There are deeper implications as well. As Brown explains,

There's a huge difference between shame and guilt. And here's what you need to know. Shame is highly, highly correlated with addiction, depression, violence, aggression, bullying, suicide, eating disorders. And here's what you even need to know more. Guilt, inversely correlated with those things. The ability to hold

something we've done or failed to do up against who we want to be is incredibly adaptive.

Adaptation is part of the decision to grow. As we know, change is inevitable. Growth is optional. It's up to us but it starts with the concept of acceptance.

It's spring today. This day, March the 20th is the vernal equinox. The length of the daytime and the length of the nighttime are the same today. They are balanced. This happens only two times a year. Early spring accepts late winter and will soon teach her how to flower. Everywhere around us, life is new.

There is a bridge made out of flowers in a place called Shelburne Falls and if you cross it, you become a butterfly. You shed whatever chrysalis you carry and you unfold new and boldly colored wings, having never seen them—not even once before. All is change in this good season. Are you ready? ...because change happens, whether we want it to or not. “Are you ready to accept the challenge of change?” If you are, that's wonderful because acceptance is a way of saying, “yes” to life.

Not all of us are ready and there is not judgment here. It is enough to keep our eyes on the prize. If you find that you are not ready to accept the challenge of change in life, consider the possibility that behind this “no” lay a deeper yes. Resistance is not futile by neither is it meaningful necessarily. As we know, change is happening all around us, ready or not.

Michael Hedges wrote a song of that title. I learned it note for note years ago. I'll have to relearn the chords and the melody again. The lyrics are lovely.

Ready or not—here I come
Who shall I say is calling?
My image is refracting
through wide wild angles of publicity
Ready or not—tongue in groove
Lose yourself and wait for your heart to speak

My favorite verse is the last...

Ready or not—here I come
Naked eyes and naked ears
sighting in
sounding out
Fear can always frighten up a few disciples
But no thing can convert true identity

Who we are is changing. It always has been and it always will be. The question is: Can you accept the challenge of change? Are you ready to say yes? Because big changes are ‘coming’...they're happening now. Ready or not.

There is a bridge made out of flowers in a place called Shelburne Falls and if we cross it, you become a butterfly. We shed whatever chrysalis we carry and we unfold new and boldly colored wings and either we fall or fly. May we make the best choice that we can...in good times and in tempest, in conflict and in consensus, held, whole and honored by a love that knows no bounds.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.