

“Belum”
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Meditation

Americans, it is observed, prefer definite answers. Let your yea be yea and your nay be nay. Yes or no. No grays, please.

In Indonesia, there is a word in common use that nicely wires around the need for black and white. Belum is the word and it means ‘not quite yet.’ A lovely word implying continuing possibility. “Do you speak English?” “Belum.” Not quite yet. “Do you have any children?” “Belum.” Do you know the meaning of life?” “Belum.”

It is considered both impolite and cynical to say, “No!” outright. This leads to some funny moments. “Is the house on fire?” “Belum.” Not quite yet.

It’s an attitude kin to that old vaudeville joke: “Do you play the violin?” “I don’t know, I never tried.”

Perhaps. Maybe. Possibly. Not yes or no, but squarely within the realm of what might be. Soft edges are welcome in this great bus ride of human adventure.

Is this the best of all possible worlds? Belum.
Is the world coming to an end? Belum.
Will we live happily ever after? Belum.
Have we learned to live without weapons of mass destruction? Belum.

In some ways, we don’t know. We’ve never tried. Is it hopeless to think that we might someday try? Belum. Not quite yet.

- Robert Fulghum

Sermon

“Why?!? Why are you doing this?”

“There’s something I want to explain to you. Something important. But I can’t. You’ll figure it out in time.”

“But I want to know now! Why can’t you tell me?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

This, of course, just frustrated the stew out of me. It had been a hard year. My first year at Kindergarten started. My parents were struggling with what eventually would end up in divorce. And now my babysitter was telling me that she was leaving to go to college. And she wouldn’t explain why she had to go half way across the country instead of stay at home.

“Things will change for you someday and it’ll make sense.”

“But I don’t want things to change.”

“Someday you’ll look forward to change.”

“Not me. I don’t want to change.”

“You will.”

“What’s wrong with me the way I am? Why do I need to change?”

“Nothing is wrong with you. But do you want to be five years old forever?”

This one stumped me. I was silent.

“Someday it’ll make sense to you.”

“No it won’t,” I protested.

“Then I’ll come back and explain it to you,” she said. But she never did.

There’s a theory that all ministers have two things in common. First, we all had sadistic babysitters. People in whose care we were placed who kept us frustrated with unresolved questions. And it prompted us to spend our

lives in a search to find people to care for so that we could systematically return the favor and frustrate them with the same kind of unresolved questions. This is true, by the way. So, it is here that I would like to mention that there is something I want to explain to you. Something important that you need to know. But I *can't*. At least 'not quite yet.' Belum. You'll figure it out in time. Maybe even by the end of the sermon.

The second thing that all ministers have in common is, perhaps, a little less obvious. We all have a love-hate relationship with change. We want people to know they are good just the way they are. But we also want them to change.

There is a saying that reminds us that the only thing that ever likes change is a wet baby. Change is uncomfortable. Disorienting. It requires our constant attention. It demands adjustment. Leads to uncertainty. Even insecurity. And yet, it is also inevitable.

It seems that the old adage holds true: 'the only thing constant in life is change.' And yet it is human nature to avoid it – to seek and hold on to something constant or dependable. It is our longing for reliability that asks us to want to believe we have both feet firmly on the unchanging earth. So think about how disconcerting it is to be reminded that this earth is spinning at a surface level of just over 1000 miles per hour and that we are hurdling through space, around the sun, at 67,000 miles per hour. And these are just the unnoticed spatial changes. A lot more disconcerting are the changes we navigate around time, our health and the unpredictability of the many relationships we are in.

Change almost always requires decision making. Either in our effort to create change or respond to it. And the decisions we make aren't usually in response to 'yes' or 'no' questions. They fall squarely in that realm where we don't have all the information we'd like. Such are the circumstances that lead everyone to some occasional hemming and hawing.

A few years back a book came out which became a number one bestseller. It was called "Who Moved My Cheese." It was a short fable about two mice (Sniff and Scurry) and two little people (Hem and Haw) trapped in a maze looking for cheese. The mice used instinct, memory and rudimentary senses to search for the cheese. The little people used more powerful brains, beliefs, emotion, logic and rationale in their search.

As the fable begins, all four start out in the maze until, after only a short time they come across a whole lot of cheese. They eat their fill. They go home. They go back the next day, same routine, ending up at the same spot. Nothing changes the next day. Nor the next. Habits form. Routines emerge. The path from their homes to Cheese Station C become ingrained in their heads. It becomes 'their' path. This is how some of us sometimes think we'd like to live our lives. With few changes and a lot of dependability.

Then, one day, everything changes for Hem and Haw. They arrive at Cheese Station C just like any other day. But the cheese is gone.

The mice, Sniff and Scurry, notice this. They look at one another, size up the situation, and immediately go back out into the maze to look for more cheese. The book is principally about how a different perspective and response comes from the little people (Hem and Haw). Their sophisticated brains had compiled enough evidence for them to expect cheese each time they went to the same place. They had even come to a point where they reasoned that they deserved the cheese. Cheese, they thought, was their divine right. Because of this, they had gotten into the habit of getting up later each day, taking off their shoes when they got to the cheese. Eating until they were full. Falling asleep. Eating more and then waddling home.

On the day they arrived and found no cheese, they couldn't believe it. It wasn't possible. There had always been cheese. After a few seconds they began screaming: "NO CHEESE?!?!? WHO MOVED MY CHEESE they cried.

They immediately wondered who did this to them. And spoke about how unfair it was. They talked about how much they deserved the cheese, on account of having worked to find it in the first place. They talked about wanting compensation for the cheese that had been taken. About retribution and re-compensation. When Haw listened to

all this and asked Hem if, maybe, they shouldn't just accept that there was no more cheese and go back to looking in the maze, Hem said that was unthinkable. That he didn't have to change since he wasn't the one who made the cheese go away.

I learned a name for this kind of attitude. It was given to me by Ken Jackson, the Director of Chaplaincy at Toronto General Hospital. He used it to describe the patients who came in – and there were many – with the belief that it was unfair they were sick – that their good health was taken away. That cancer and heart attacks and disease were things that were supposed to happen to someone else. Bad people. Ken gave this attitude the name: GIDE – which is an acronym that stands for, “Grandiose Infantile Demands of Entitlement”. And it comes primarily by people who don't deal very well with change.

I found that acronym very amusing. But one thing about humor is that it is usually only funny when it is based in truth. Demands of entitlement are what make it so hard for anyone – or any system - to create or adapt to change. When we think about how changes come so infrequently or so slowly in systems of racism or sexism or classism or ableism or homophobia, one of the reasons is entitlement. People who feel entitled - the people in control - too often feel justified – even morally empowered – to keep in place the system that supports their entitlement.

Even when the issue of entitlement isn't at work, there is still another major hurdle to navigate in creating or adapting to change: our love of the status quo. The place so comfortable in its familiarity that we can't give it up even though it no longer gives us what we need. Back in the maze, when Hem finally began to question whether they might go out into the maze, Haw replied plainly that he would rather keep returning to Cheese Station C. More cheese was bound to show up. So for a long while they both kept returning to the same place. Even though each time they did they found no cheese.

There is the story of the young groom who is making dinner for his new bride and she questions him as he is preparing the ham, why he cuts off the end of the ham before he puts it in the oven. “That's the way it's done,” he replies. “But why?” The groom decides to call and ask his mother, whom he had seen do this same thing for all of his twenty-something years. “Because that's the way it's done.” Unsatisfied, they all decide to call Grandma, who was the one who passed it on to the family in the first place. “What in tarnation have you been doin' all these years? Didn't you know when your father and I lived in that ol' house the stove was so small it wouldn't take a pan big enough to hold an entire ham. So we had to cut some off the end.”

Those who read the book know that Haw eventually got fed up waiting around for yesterday's cheese to show up. He began to think it was time to start looking for tomorrow's cheese instead. But when he tries to go, he is ridiculed by Hem. “We're too old for this. Do you want to feel like a fool running around in a maze? Wait here with me until they put the cheese back! You'll just get lost in the maze!”

Sometimes, we can find ourselves in a system where change is so feared, it is heavily discouraged. Sometimes actually punished. Such a system is described in a well known behavioral experiment.

Five apes were placed in a cage. In the center of the cage stairs led up to a banana which hung down from the ceiling by a string. Before long, an ape noticed the banana and went over to climb the stairs. But as soon as he touched the stairs, all the apes were sprayed with cold water.

After a while, another ape would make an attempt. Same result: all the apes are sprayed with cold water.

As soon as the reality of the cold water became familiar, scientists turned it off. They found that when another ape tried to climb the stairs, the other apes would try to prevent it even though no water sprayed them. They next removed one ape from the cage and replaced it with a new one. Seeing the banana, the new ape would try to climb the stairs. To his horror, all of the other apes attacked him. After another attempt and another attack, he knows that if he tries to climb the stairs, he will be attacked.

Next, they removed another of the original five apes and replaced it with a new one. The newcomer goes to the stairs and is attacked. The previous newcomer takes part in the punishment with enthusiasm.

Again, one of the original apes is replaced with a new one. The new one makes it to the stairs and is attacked as well. Two of the four apes that beat him up have no idea why they were not permitted to climb the stairs, or why they are participating in the beating of the newest ape.

After replacing the fourth and fifth original apes, all the apes which have been sprayed with cold water have been replaced. Nevertheless, no ape ever again is allowed to approach the stairs. After a while, none of them ever try, even though none of them have ever been sprayed by water.

Why not? "Because that's the way its always been around here."

So what does this all mean? Why am I talking about change? There are four reasons.

The first one is obvious. Look around you. Anything look different than a couple months ago? A lot has changed around us and it is important that we acknowledge that and prepare ourselves for a proper response. Do you want to know who moved your cheese? It's them! (point to new members) And all those people who we are counting on to help us begin looking for tomorrow's cheese. If we continue to come here looking for yesterday's cheese, we're going to be severely disappointed.

Does anybody know the seven last words of a dying church? "We've never done it that way before."

The second reason I am talking about change is because we're in a church. So many people have the mistaken notion that a church is all about sanctuary from the world. Security. That it stands for something that is unmoveable in a sea of change. That it's about finding the one true answer and practicing the one true way and that as long as we behave and abide God will love us and all will be well in the heavens.

That's not church. That's organized denial. And the worst part about it is that it denies the very heart of what the church stands for, which is transformation. We come to church not for comfort or complacency but to be moved to our best selves. We come to be lifted out of the mental, spiritual and emotional ruts that eventually lead to uninspired lives. We come, as the saying goes, to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable – always looking for a way to move from what we had been to what we can be. That is what church is for.

The third reason is because of who we are as Unitarian Universalists. There is very little about our movement that has remained constant over our long and illustrious history. Our view of God has changed and is still changing. Our view of Jesus, of heaven, of hell, of humanity, of what it means to live a good and responsible life has all changed – and in wrestling with these changes we have managed to have a disproportional effect on the societies in which we've grown, helping to build communities and institutions based on inherent worth and dignity of all people regardless of whether or not they act or think like we do.

The one thing constant about our movement is that we are a collective of conscientious dissenters. The history of religion is marked by our contributing challenges to religious thought, theology and bringing our perspective and values to life in the real world. It is said that we are part of a two thousand year old religious reformation. The only difference between us and other religions is that we never felt like the reformation is over. We ask ourselves if the reformation needed in religion and the world was complete when the Jews rebuilt the temple. When Jesus was born, or when he was crucified. When Catholicism came to power. When Martin Luther put his treatise on the doors of Wittenburg. When the Anglican church was created. When religious practice was separated from civil society. To each of these questions we can only respond by looking out at the world and seeing what is needed. And our answer is the same every time: "Belum." Not quite yet. We are reformers and change agents still.

And finally, we need to know about and embrace change because of the questions we each come here with. Have I become the person I always wanted to be? Has the world found all the truth there is to find, or even, has all the truth been revealed? Do I have enough friends and people who I can count on in the hard times. Is the world a place for freedom and justice for all? We come here, to this church, to think about these questions. Inevitably,

invariably our answer is the same every time: “Belum.” Not quite yet. This mixed up, crazy, wonderful world is not yet done changing. And neither are we.

So there is something I need to tell you. Something I hope you’ll understand. Perhaps it is what my babysitter was planning on telling me some day. It is wisdom found in the title of a popular play.

I love you. You’re perfect. Now Change.

We are about the work of finding tomorrow’s cheese because none of us wants to be five years old forever. I hope when we come to this time next month, or next year or ten years from now, no one will ever be able to offer you that old worn southern compliment, “Oh, you haven’t changed a bit.” For what a slap in the face that is for religious people like us who are making their way in the world.

To the Glory of Life.