

# **Change, Permanence and Spiritual Renewal**

It started as a routine operation; my mother had asked me to be at her side as she was going to undergo a simple: operation to remove a small amount of cancerous tissue from her colon. I came back from a federal disaster in West Virginia to be with her. So, on 15 August 2003, my brother and I waited as she entered the surgical ward. The doctor said it was a simple operation and asked us to come back in three hours to see her coming out of the recovery room. I went to walk my dog back at her home, a mere 10 minutes away.

I was planning to grab some lunch and then be back at the hospital to await my mom coming out of surgery. About 20 minutes later my brother called me up and said: there's something wrong, come back immediately, mom is close to death. That started a saga that lasted for 14 days as she developed sepsis due to a leakage in the sutures and a surgeon's mistake in perforating her liver.

For over two weeks, we kept video on an increasingly weaker and feebler mom. She had given explicit instructions against intubation, or resuscitation efforts, which we obliged. So finally, she transitioned into another dimension. I was aghast. Two weeks later, I had come back to Connecticut for what I thought was going to be, a simple medical procedure, and now I saw my mom dead. In the middle of my anguish, as we were walking

out of the hospital, we went by the maternity ward, and something stopped me on my tracks. It was the sound of nursery rhyme chimes that announced the birth of a new baby at the hospital.

Despite my unbelievable grief, I became aware of the cycle of life, that renewal comes at a price. That permanence is not assured in our lives, at any time, at any place, on any occasion. And that if we are aware of the role of change, however, painful sometimes, it can bring forth a spiritual renewal to bring forth positivity and beneficial outlook in our lives.

The world of philology is intrinsically, tied to the concept of history. Our concepts of renewal, permanence, and change, are very much a part of this world. Two competing hypotheses influence our perception of such reality. One, that reality and history are linear in nature, that they proceed in an inexorable march to the future, without regard for what has gone on before, and the other one, is that history and life are cyclical processes, and that these cycles repeat themselves while denying permanent change.

The former's most erudite thinker was the Roman historian Levy, in his History of the Noble Romans, whose views have been the antithesis of Thucydides in declaring that history is simply, unpredictable. That history, and our reality, are impermanent and therefore unpredictable, and therefore looking at the past was an illusory practice with little relevance to future behavior.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus gave impetus to the ideas of impermanence and renewal, as he stated, “No man steps into the same river twice”. Still, many other philosophers, from Greece to Rome to Western Europe, argued against the ideas of renewal and impermanence.

While change has been an integral part of western culture’s view of history and civilization, the friction between human activity as a cycle that allows us to look at past behavior and predict future outcomes, with the ability to change forecasted outcomes through concerted action, and history as a linear activity with no relation to past events, has been a constant player in Western European thought.

While an overwhelming number of western European and American thinkers have cited the need to look retrospectively and espoused the need for renewal and reconciliation by looking at past behavior, such thoughts have paled compared to the concept of progress for progress’s sake, the idea of quick salvation, buy a Papal Bull, say two our fathers, and, voila, go and do it again. Or as in many evangelical religions, faith for the sake of belief grants salvation. As a result, the concept of living one’s faith is often a foreign concept in modern Western thought.

Progress in the workaday world oftentimes means industrialization, the accumulation and growth of capital, exploitation of labor, as well as defoliation, strip mining, aquifer

depletion, ocean garbage patches and unbreathable air. Piety is considered something that monks do in a cloistered convent; pietism – living one's faith by practicing what one preaches, is an intrusion into our workaday world; a trend we see as ubiquitous in our body politics today as we see people calling themselves pious and Christians engaging in the most unnoble, impious and unchristian behavior, and their followers accepting, enabling, validating, and adapting to such behavior.

On the other hand, the concept of living a pious life is inherent in non-Western traditions including Buddhist and Hindu philosophies.

It was a Unitarian Minister, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and his Concord neighbor, Henry David Thoreau, who began to expose American thinkers to non-Western philosophies early in the founding days of our country. Emerson's essay "Illusions" reverberate with the concept of Samsara, the Hindu concept of repeated reincarnation leading to perfection, as he states...

And, out of endeavor  
To change and to flow,  
The gas become solid,  
And phantoms and nothings  
Return to be things,  
And endless imbroglio  
Is law and the world, --  
Then first shalt thou know,  
That in the wild turmoil,

Horsed on the Proteus,  
Thou ridest to power,  
And to endurance.

The law of karma is one of the central tenets of Hindu philosophy, one of the laws of action and reaction, which govern life. Upon death, an individual's soul does not die off, but instead it unfolds into another body to continue the process of karma and redemption for as many times as it is required until the soul is perfected to be near God. To release the soul from Samsara and enter the realm of Moksha, requires repeated renewals of virtuous living, and the acceptance of tolerance even for those who are non-believers. It requires one to live a life of renewal, pietism, and abnegation...

Thoreau saw karma as a fundamental principle of the universe — everything we do comes back to us in some form or the other. In his writing, particularly in "Walden; or, Life in the Woods," Thoreau examined the idea that living in harmony with nature was a way to access the spiritual realm and work in harmony with the universe. To Thoreau, our actions impact the natural world and the universe, and he believed in taking personal responsibility for our role in the world and the consequences of our actions.

Pretty much in the way it is reflected in our Unitarian Universalist principles, Thoreau also believed in the interconnection among all things and saw the entire universe as a web of cause-and-effect relationships. Therefore, he believed

that our actions shape the world around us in positive or negative ways, and the universe responds accordingly. In his view, living with integrity and compassion towards all living beings was the surest way to put oneself in harmony with the universe and enhance our fortunes. And that required introspection and a sense of intellectual and spiritual renewal.

I believe that there are three components to our life as individuals on this planet: time, space, and energy. Time and space have been proven to be relative in nature. Energy, on the other hand, is immutable. Energy is a continuum of our existence, and I believe that our energy continues to exist, even though our bodies may return to dust. It is plausible that, like Hindu ideology states, that our living energy is renewed within another life. And I would certainly hope that through experience and renewal, such temporary existence within a constant of energy could be perfected.

As Unitarian universalists, let us recall that one of our core beliefs is our reliance on Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science and warn us against idolatries of mind and spirit. And yet another one, Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered religions, which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Reverend John C. Morgan a Unitarian Universalist minister serving congregations in New England, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, has contended that we have allowed the

concepts of piety and Pietism to be defined by its opponents. As a result, he calls for a better understanding of pietism and spiritual renewal in Unitarian Universalist communities.

Reverend Morgan states that the renewal of Universalism will make us whole as a people, enriching our spiritual life and reconnecting us with religious traditions that share our heritage: The Society of Friends, Moravians, Methodists, Lutherans, and others. And as he says, “the recovery of our Pietist heritage brings with it a judgment about our failure as a religious community to keep alive a significant part of our heritage and, in the name of a rational orthodoxy, to deny our own spiritual resources.”

Piety and Unitarian Universalism are two concepts that may seem at first glance to be at odds with each other, but in fact they can coexist quite comfortably within Unitarian Universalism.

Piety generally refers to devotion, especially to a deity or religious tradition. While Unitarian Universalism does not require belief in any specific deity or creed, many Unitarian Universalists still feel a deep sense of spiritual wonder and reverence, which is a part of our set of beliefs calling for our direct experience that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life. This can be expressed through a variety of practices, such as prayer, meditation, or simply spending time in nature.

At the same time, Unitarian Universalism is also grounded in an intellectual tradition that values critical thinking, exploration, and questioning. This means that even those who do express piety can do so in a way that is reflective and individualized, rather than simply following a prescribed dogma.

Ultimately, Unitarian Universalism is a place where people can bring their whole selves, including their sense of piety or spirituality, and find a community that celebrates diversity and encourages personal growth and development.

Seeking spiritual renewal can help individuals to feel more grounded, purposeful, and connected to themselves and to others. It can be a way to cultivate a greater sense of resilience, gratitude, and wonder in the face of life's challenges and uncertainties. It can also be a deeply personal and individual process, and people may have a variety of reasons for pursuing it.

How many of you oftentimes feel the weight of the world on your shoulders? The stresses of modern life can generate a plethora of reasons for seeking spiritual renewal. We seem to be inundated, perhaps overwhelmed, with non-stop information from every angle, enough that we can feel disconnected from our sense of purpose or meaning and needing to find grounding and peace or feeling a desire to deepen one's connection to others and to the wider world without the constant drumming of technology.



The loneliness of today's rapid world, the needs and demands of family, children, spouses, friends, colleagues, institutions, catalyze the fast pace of life to make us tired and depressed and feeling with little energy. It is time then, to embark on spiritual renewal.

For Unitarian Universalists, spiritual renewal can take many forms. It can involve exploring one's beliefs and values, deepening one's connection to nature, cultivating compassion and mindfulness, or any number of other practices that cultivate a sense of inner peace, joy, and connection to something greater than oneself. The goal of spiritual renewal is typically to connect with that which is transcendent and to foster a sense of meaning and purpose in one's life. Ultimately, spiritual renewal is a deeply personal and individual journey, and different Unitarian Universalists may approach it in very different ways.

The results of our introspection and spiritual renewal can bring about positive change in our minds, a sense of self-realization, a better perspective on life, a better sense of happiness, and being able to do a triage in our lives and sift what is really important from what is simply chaff and irrelevant noise. The goal is to start and continue an ongoing process of self-discovery that will last a lifetime. That in itself will lead to less stress and a contemplation of happiness.

In the word of Peter Morales, the former President of the Unitarian Universalist Association "I urge you—yes, you—to

make some space to reflect on what your spirit needs right now. Deep down you know; we all do. Our deepest longings will guide us. Make space for beauty and love and play. Let your spirit heal and soar.

When our spirits are strong and reconnected, our work for compassion and justice has enduring power. When our spirits are renewed, we are blessings to one another and to the world”