

## **“The Spiritual Dimensions of Novelty”**

**Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan**

**by Andrew Frantz**

**September 1, 2019**

I began the service today with the words of Kalidasa, an Indian poet of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. “Look to this day,” he says, “for it is life, the very life of life!”<sup>1</sup> I find the same sentiment in the quotation by Robert Jeffries that’s printed in the order of service today:

*It is eternity now.*

*I am in the midst of it.*

*It is about me, in the sunshine;*

*I am in it, as the butterfly in the light-laden air.*

*Nothing has to come,*

*It is now.*<sup>2</sup>

This sense of seizing the moment and being alive to the freshness of the present moment is what I hope to capture today with my message here.

Today I’m talking about novelty, but not the kind of novelty like a joke item in a store, such as a whoopee cushion, or a novelty record which means a parody song—something that’s amusing, but shallow and passing. Instead I’m talking about the quality of novelty and the experience of novelty—of newness and freshness. Like the way we say, “that’s a novel idea.” That kind of novelty.

The idea of novelty, or newness, has a positive spiritual side and a negative one. It’s good to have new things, right? I mean, who doesn’t like a new outfit of clothes...or a new car? We also like new experiences, such as going to new places. There is a freshness and aliveness that’s exciting there. The trouble is that it can be a never-ending quest for what’s new.

I know someone in my extended family who is always getting the newest electronic gadget—when a new I-phone comes out, this person gets it right away. Other people in the family have benefitted because a perfectly good 2-year-old computer gets passed along when this person gets the newest model. Maybe you

know someone like that too. Or maybe you are that person who always wants the new thing.

I don't mean to throw this person under the bus or belittle him, because I think this is actually very common. We are all vulnerable to this tendency in our consumerist, materialist, disposable society. I know I have done this too--I've bought new things for the emotional benefit of it, even when I didn't need the new thing. We can be this way with experiences too—chasing after new thrills on a large scale (new houses, new trips to foreign countries, new jobs, new relationships) or on a small scale (new movies, new restaurants).

There is an element of addiction to this constant craving for the new. Listen to this quotation from Dr. Andrew Weil:

*I maintain that the essence of addiction is craving for an experience or object to make yourself feel all right...I also feel that addiction is something that's fundamentally human; it affects everybody.<sup>3</sup>*

Dr. Weil is using the idea of addiction here as a universal, not just something the alcoholic or drug addict knows. He's asserting that we have all had that experience. For example, how about this statement: "I'll be OK once I get my cup of coffee." Or this one: "I can relax once I finish this project at work." Or, "I can have company over to the house once I re-do the kitchen."

What's present in all of these statements is the idea that I'm not OK now, but I will be OK later when I get this new thing, or when I do this new thing. And the counter-point to that, of course, is the radical notion that I'm OK just the way I am today, and I don't have to do anything, or get anything, to be OK.

I'm OK whether I have money or not. I'm OK whether I succeed or not. I'm OK whether I have that cookie or not. I'm OK the way I am.

I invite you to try this out for yourself, this kind of affirmation, if you think it might benefit you. Maybe try it in the mirror where you tell the truth to yourself.

So I talked about the negative side of novelty, the way that it can be a compulsive pursuit. What I'm advocating this morning, however, is a healthy Zen approach to novelty.

One of my favorite spiritual teachers is Pema Chodron, a Buddhist nun. Her phrase that's related to what we're talking about is *Learning to Stay*. She says that we get caught up in worry and negative thoughts all the time, and the antidote to that is to stay with what's happening right now. To return to the breath, feel the breath in your body, and be aware of what's happening right now. Stay with the feeling. And even if it's a feeling of sadness or fear, stay with it. Don't go off into trying to escape or distract yourself—be present to the moment that is happening now, the only moment we have access to, and when we are truly present in the moment, we are experiencing the newness and freshness of life. Because it's always different and new, each day and each moment.<sup>4</sup>

Earlier this summer I went jogging in a wooded area and it was beautiful. And the remarkable thing was that I had never been to that park, even though it was less than an hour from my house, and I had been living there for 18 years. Sometimes we think that life is routine and dull and boring, but we need to make just a little effort to find what's new and fresh.

But let's take an example that's far more everyday than me driving 45 minutes to go for a jog in a new park. Imagine some part of your daily routine that is very familiar—maybe the route you take to go to work, or to go to the store, or some other thing you do over and over again, maybe having breakfast or dinner with your partner or your family. The spiritual practice of novelty that I'm suggesting is the ability to experience freshness and newness even in the midst of that routine.

Another way to put this is being open to beauty. There is a saying from the Navajo people in our hymnal that reads,

*Beauty is before me, and  
Beauty is behind me,  
above me and below me  
hovers the beautiful.  
I am surrounded by it,*

*I am immersed in it.*<sup>5</sup>

The suggestion here is that we might just need to appreciate the beauty within our routines – the beauty of the people we spend time with every day, the beauty of the trees and clouds on our way to work.

William Henry Davies has a great poem about this, which is also in our hymnal as the words to one of the hymns:

*What is this life if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare.  
No time to stand beneath the boughs  
And stare as long as sheep or cows.  
No time to see, when woods we pass,  
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass.  
No time to see, in broad daylight,  
Streams full of stars, like skies at night.  
A poor life this if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare.*<sup>6</sup>

The poem that Laura read for us today, *Awakening* by Harriet Kofalk, contains the lines

*as I set forth  
into the day  
the birds sing  
with new voices  
and I listen  
with new ears*<sup>7</sup>

This is what I'm advocating, for you and for myself: may we listen to the birds with new ears. May we see each other in this fellowship with new eyes.

How many of you have been coming to this fellowship for more than a year? If so, you begin to know what to expect when you go to coffee hour: you know who's going to sit where and who's going to talk about politics and who's going to talk

about church business. And you know who annoys you or rubs you the wrong way for some reason. But what if we approached the coffee hour conversations with the same spiritual discipline as what Harriet Kofalk says about the birds? Can we *listen with new ears* to one another in this Fellowship?

What if we took the spiritual discipline of novelty to our approach to this Fellowship and how we welcome people—let's look with fresh eyes at how we can be more welcoming, how we can create a more loving, supporting, inclusive community. Because everyone who comes new to this congregation changes the congregation and they are one of us. How can we listen better to one another's truth? We will disagree about God and religion sometimes. We will struggle to understand one another's truths sometimes, to hear each other's pain, to know what each other's identities are.

So I am advocating a spiritual practice of novelty for us: first in our daily lives, as we appreciate each unfolding moment and look for the beauty the surrounds us; secondly, I advocate an attitude of novelty in within our Fellowship as we seek to see old friends and newcomers alike with fresh eyes and listen to them with fresh ears; finally, let's cultivate a sense of novelty in the way that we as a Fellowship engage with the broader community. Let's have a sense of newness and freshness as we spread this radical Unitarian Universalist idea: that we are all OK just the way we are; we all deserve love from ourselves, from each other, and from mysterious force that created us (called Life, called Gaia, called Allah). That there is inherent worth and dignity in all people (Native Americans, African Americans, those who are trying to be Americans, people who have no wish to be Americans); that we are all interconnected in the web of life; and that we are all seeking truth and meaning as long as we live.

Today is September 1<sup>st</sup>. School has started for many of us. It's the start of a new year for this congregation. May we carry this energy of newness into our work, in service of our mission:

**To be a religious community guided by love, transforming our lives and our world.**

May we be transformed by love within this Fellowship, and may that love flow outward from this place to bless the whole world, with no exceptions.

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<sup>1</sup> Kalidasa, Singing the Living Tradition #419

<sup>2</sup> Jeffries, Robert, Singing the Living Tradition #527

<sup>3</sup> Weil, Andrew, quoted in Twelve & Zen by Bill Krumbein

<sup>4</sup> Chodron, Pema, "Learning to Stay" audio CD produced by Sounds True

<sup>5</sup> Navajo Prayer, Singing the Living Tradition #682

<sup>6</sup> Davies, William Henry, Singing the Living Tradition #94

<sup>7</sup> Kofalk, Harriet, "Awakening," published in Earth Prayers edited by Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon