Embracing Change Rev. Gary Paterson

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Perhaps because I was able to grab some January holiday time in Hawaii, one of the “youngest” parts of the earth, I found myself thinking a lot about change. Hawaii came into being some 70 million years ago as the Pacific tectonic plate went sliding over a vent in the earth’s mantle through which molten lava poured ever up and out. Eight islands now, with the Big Island still growing with continuing volcanic eruption; with older, sinking, dying islands to the northwest, reduced to coral atolls; and with a new island gradually forming to the south, though still below the ocean’s surface. Everything is always changing.

[](http://www.garypaterson.ca/files/2015/02/8374838745_f146f4d0e4_k.jpg)

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We celebrate that in [A New Creed](http://www.united-church.ca/beliefs/creed):

*We believe in God,  
  who has created and is creating,  
  who has come in Jesus,  
    the Word made flesh,  
    to reconcile and make new,  
who works in us and others  
   by the Spirit.*

We read about change in scripture, from the opening verse of Genesis, “In the beginning…” and then on through all the historical changes in Israel’s journey; to arrive at another beginning with Jesus’ good news of the in-breaking Kingdom of God through to Jesus’ death and resurrection, and Paul’s fervent conviction that when anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; ending, in the last few pages of the Bible, with God’s final promise, “Behold, I make all things new” (Rev. 21:5) ­-­ which just happens to be the theme of [General Council 42](http://www.united-church.ca/getinvolved/events/42nd-general-council).

And of course we know that the church is always in the process of change.

Just as an aside… did you know, for instance, that there are presently 36,000 different Christian denominations around the globe – and a hundred different Presbyterian denominations in South Korea alone! Or that China has something like 80 to 100 million Christians, a number only exceeded by the United States and Brazil.

But knowing this, and even hearing it said, doesn’t make change any easier to live with. We humans seem to have a love-hate relationship with change. Probably because it can hurt, turn us upside down; because it includes loss and endings, as well as new beginnings.

So what does the United Church need to do? How will we embrace change? Who knows… but here are a few meandering thoughts about what I think people are looking for.

SBNRs (“Spiritual But Not Religious”) and the “Nones” (as in religious affiliation? “None”) are among the fastest growing “religious” groups in Canada. It is easy to be critical and dismissive of this trend, but it’s clear that people are spiritually hungry. At the risk of stating the obvious, and coming across simplistically, I think people are yearning for an authentic encounter with Transcendence, with the Holy, with “The More,” with God – however it gets named.

A key way this happens is through the experience of awe and wonder in the encounter with the world around us. Maybe I’m simply being romantic because of “holiday/holy-day” time in Hawaii – long beach walks; snorkelling with sea turtles; watching humpback whales breach (What is the purpose of a whale?); staring at an unending swirl of stars (What is the purpose of a human being in a 15 billion-year-old universe?) We need to weave together a holy creation story with the incredible discoveries of modern science, honouring both mystery and intelligence. Look at the popularity of the film of Stephen Hawking’s life, [*The Theory of Everything*](http://youtu.be/Salz7uGp72c). Note the intensity of debate within our own church as we search for new ways to express a “post-theistic” understanding of God. Recognize the power of declaring, “All my relations!” as we search (perhaps desperately) for a new way to care for the earth.

Secondly, as Christians, we believe that the Holy can be encountered in and through the person of Jesus… the man, his story, his life and teachings, his ethics, his hope, his death, and resurrection. We need to talk about Jesus Christ, as revelation, incarnation, as a channel through whom the Spirit comes, that Holy Energy that enlivens all creation. Sometimes we are cautious in the United Church to speak openly, frequently of Jesus – perhaps worried about being identified as “one of those kinds” of Christians. We need to reclaim our truth, our language, our story. We need to talk about “for God so loves the world…” and “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring good news to the poor…” I remember a friend of mine sharing that in the midst of interfaith conversations, he realized that the unique understanding of God he brought to the table was Jesus. At first, he said, that felt almost awkward… but then, exciting and liberating.

Thirdly, I think people are seeking transformation; that is, the encounter with “The More,” with God, must make a difference in their lives, and in the world. Call it “repentance” or *metanoia* – call it changed lives, amazing grace, coming to one’s self, discipleship, following in the Way of Jesus, a new lifestyle, working the twelve-step program. The encounter has to matter, to be important. “Don’t waste my time!” say so many younger people. “When the lives of those in church show how important God is to them, then maybe I’ll show up.” I think that’s why Pope Francis is catching the imagination of so many around the globe – he seems so real, and when he talks about a gospel for the poor, you believe him. It’s probably why neomonastic communities are emerging here and there, across the country. It’s why people want to engage in experiential and participatory worship; in meditation, prayer, mindfulness, and spiritual practices. It’s why people want to be about the work of compassion, of peace and justice, and of loving the world. They want to make a difference.

Yes, we in the United Church need to attend to issues of leadership, structure, amalgamations, ways of organizing church, technology, building an inclusive, intercultural community. But we also need to know how all of this work brings us and others closer to the heart of God.