

ResistingChange

January 4, 2015

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Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening:

We are here,
on a sunny morn after a rainy weekend,
at the beginning of the year,
to find the strength of our deeper lives
amid the flood-tide of things that hook us,
and keep us from moving forward.

And so, in this common house of life and love, may we lead lives of welcome, wisdom and kindness. Bestowing ourselves bountifully to the common good, let gratitude and question displace any easy assumption. Knowing that we are within this hurting, amazing world, not outside it, we approach our earth and social equity mindfully. Let each day express our amen.

Singing #55 Dark of Winter

Ingathering:

Shingebiss and the North Wind

From a 19th century literary tale attributed to Chippewa sources, retold by Fran Stallings.

Shingebiss and the North Wind

Debbie: Long ago, the People could not stay in their northern homes all year round. It was pleasant in the summer, cool and breezy. But in the fall they knew they would have to go south like the birds, like the buffalo. Because of Old Man North Wind.

Old Man North Wind's headdress was not made of feathers, but of icicles. His clothes were made of ice and snow. And the features of his face were fierce, twisted with hate for other living things.

When he came down from the far north country and blew his frosty breath — Pah! (*I strike the strings hard here, rather than make a mouth noise*) — Everything froze. There was no more food. The animals who could not sleep through the winter had to go south. The People always went, too.

Mark: But one year a young woman of the tribe, whose name was Shingebiss, said:

Debbie: "It's not fair that we have to leave our homes because of Old Man North Wind! He's just a creature like the rest of us. I'm not afraid of him."
(*Debbie sings chant*)

The other People said to me, 'No, Shingebiss, you must not stay. You will freeze. You will starve! Come south with us like we always do.' But I said, 'No, I will not go with you. I have ideas for ways to stay warm and find food. I want to try them. I'm not afraid.' The other people pleaded with me, but I was stubborn. So they said goodbye. They were sure that they would never see me alive again."

Mark: When they had gone south, Shingebiss began to work. She built a new kind of lodge, not open and breezy like the summer lodges of the People, but with double walls — which she stuffed with dry grass and moss, to keep out the cold and wind. Then she collected great piles of dry wood, so that she could keep her fire going at all times.

She waited. And she sang:
(Debbie sings chant)

Debbie: "Then Old Man North Wind came down from the far north country. He blew his frosty breath — *(Mark blows and gestures)* — and everything died. Everything was still — except for the smoke rising from my lodge."

Mark: "What is this? Smoke rising! Who is this, who dares to defy me? They can't live without food. *(blow hard)* — Pah! — Ah, that's better. Thick ice covering all the lakes and streams.

But wait, Shingebiss just walked out onto the ice and is chopping holes. She's going ice fishing! She's taking her fish home to her lodge, cooking and eating them. She looks much too warm and comfortable." *(Mark walks around, blowing)*

Debbie: "Old Man North Wind, you can blow all you want around and around my lodge, but I will just built up my fire and be warm and comfortable."

Mark: "So, I will come inside. *(mime opening door and stepping in)*

Shingebiss, I can tell you feel my chill, even though you are sitting by your fire. It won't matter how much more wood you add to the fire."

(Debbie sings chant)

(Mark -Old Man North Wind - comes closer and sits down next to Debbie)

Debbie: (more wood - more flames)

"Why, Old Man North Wind, it seems your headdress of icicles is drooping...

Your clothes of ice and snow are becoming soggy, and full of holes...

Are those drops of water running down your face?"

Mark: "What is this? It can't be tears, because I never cry. This can only mean that I'm —

melting!!!”

(Old Man North Wind runs out of Shingebiss' lodge, saying)

“This Shingebiss is too strong for me!”

Debbie: “In the spring, when the People returned, they were amazed to find me alive and well. They said, “We thought you would freeze and starve! We thought we would find nothing but your bones!”

“Oh but I, Shingebiss, have learned ways to keep warm, and ways to find food. I can teach them to you. But you can't stay here if you're afraid. Let's sing my song together.”

Children leave after song and Nathan plays.

Greeting

Affirming #544 *The New Year*, by Kaki McTigue

Singing #350 *The New Year Song*

Communing

After this wet weekend, winter finally arrives with its cold and ice and snow this week. And so, of course, whatever will come in the new year also begins to arrive, day by day, moment by moment.

The future dawns:

Beyond the forecasts of those who claim
to find the future in the stars.

Beyond the calculations of The Farmer's Almanac.

Beyond the television pundits drawing passionate conclusions.

Beyond the predictions based on personal mood
or desire or want.

Beyond the calculations of those who know
their instincts *have* to be right.

Beyond the fears of what may come, based on
what has come before.

Beyond the false certainties we may simply
fall for because we just don't know,
and feel uncomfortable with such
an agnostic life.

O Life of my life, future comes as the future comes.

And life is ours to live. To live, to live, to live.

As a gift, not a guarantee; as a revelation moment-by-moment, not as an infallibly planned-out course,
ordained from the beginning of time.

Come, Life of our lives, and flow within us during this upcoming time of silence, that we might hear our own breath, feel our own pulse, sense our own heartbeat, and begin to peel our fingers off all that we grasp onto so hard that is not life.

silence

Into the continuing silence I want to hold up the name of Leelah Alcorn, a transgender 17-year-old near Cincinnati, who left a heart-breaking suicide note saying that his life was unbearable. Her story is sad, but the future must enlarge and change to create spaciousness and welcome for persons like her. Let us keep a moment of silence for her and all who struggled to love her.

silence

Into the continuing silence, may we also feel free to speak the names, or simply remember the names, of all those whom we ourselves love, or who love us, or with whom we struggle, or miss terribly, and those who have built a temple to their memory within our hearts.

naming

Let the music of Ravel, clear as crystal, enfold our silence, and reveal the beauty of open hearts.

The First Reading comes from the great Buddhist teacher, Pema Chodron. She has written some of the best presentations on a certain Buddhist view of the world that I have read. This is from her essay "How We Get Hooked and How We Get Unhooked," 2003. The reading focuses on her central teaching, that of *shenpa*, or as Buddha himself would have said in his language "upadana," which literally means "fuel," but is usually rendered as "attachment."

You're trying to make a point with a coworker or your partner. At one moment her face is open and she's listening, and at the next, her eyes cloud over or her jaw tenses. What is it that you're seeing?

Someone criticizes you. They criticize your work, or your appearance, or your child. At moments like that, what is it you feel? It has a familiar taste in your mouth, it has a familiar smell. Once you begin to notice it, you feel like this experience has been happening forever.

The Tibetan word for this is *shenpa*. It is usually translated "attachment," but a more descriptive translation might be "hooked." When *shenpa* hooks us, we're likely to get stuck. We could call *shenpa* "that sticky feeling." It's an everyday experience. At the subtlest level, we feel a tightening, a tensing, a sense of closing down. Then we feel a sense of withdrawing, not wanting to be where we are. That's the hooked quality. That tight feeling has the power to hook us into self-denigration, blame, anger, jealousy and other emotions which lead to words and actions that end up poisoning us.

Yet we don't stop—we can't stop—because we're in the habit of associating whatever we're doing with relief from our own discomfort. This is the *shenpa* syndrome. *Shenpa* is usually involuntary and it gets right to the root of why we suffer.

Someone looks at us in a certain way, or we hear a certain song, we smell a certain smell, we walk into a certain room and *boom*. The feeling has nothing to do with the present, and nevertheless, there it is.

Shenpa thrives on the underlying insecurity of living in a world that is always changing. We experience this insecurity as a background of slight unease or restlessness. We all want some kind of relief from that unease, so we turn to what we enjoy—food, alcohol, drugs, sex, work or shopping. In moderation what we enjoy might be very delightful. We can appreciate its taste and its presence in our life. But when we empower it with the idea that it will bring us comfort, that it will remove our unease, we get hooked.

So we could also call *shenpa* “the urge”—the urge to smoke that cigarette, to overeat, to have another drink, to indulge...

The Second Reading *is a very short story told by Jesus according to the Gospel of Mark, the earliest such gospel, 71 CE. These rustic riddles are typical of the Galilean peasant teacher. Also, typical of Mark's writing style is that the parables he writes are always presented in present tense.*

So there is this farmer who scatters seed from his seed bag across the furrows of his land.

This farmer goes to sleep in his bed at night, and then gets up during the daylight hours, day in, day out. The seed he scatters eventually sprouts up, and grows of its own accord – the farmer knows nothing about why things work this way.

You see, the soil grows the crops all by itself; first the tiny sprout, then the stalk, then the mature head of the barley.

But one day, when he sees it's ready, the farmer immediately brings out his sickle, to harvest what was once but a seed.

(Music interlude: Theme from First Contact)

Preaching

I always wonder what's up when I encounter an unexpected question popping up all over the media in a single week. The question is then answered by several people from achingly divergent points of view. The question in particular is one I foreshadowed by asking Nathan to play Jerry Goldsmith's stirring anthem from the *Star Trek* film "First Contact" just a few minutes ago, which depicts our world's first encounter with an intelligent species elsewhere in space. In this fictional story, the encounter takes place in the year 2063, only some 47 years from now. But recently, Seth Shostak, a senior astronomer from Mountain View CA, said, in a speech he gave to members of our National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), that he is completely confident that we will have detected radio signals from another civilization by 2040, only 25 years from now.

Brother Guy Consolmagno, S.J., the head of the Vatican Observatory, responded that it could even happen tomorrow, this discovery. He thought no sensible person would even be surprised. He expects it, and feels certain that the same God whom he believes evolved us out of natural elements could certainly do the same thing on other worlds with other elements.

Fundamentalist preacher Ken Ham, who runs that Creation Museum down in Kentucky, asserts that there can be no aliens, ever, and that people like Shostak and Consolmagno are in "rebellion against God," whom, he claims, made humanity to be all alone in the universe. And even if there were extraterrestrials, he adds, God would send them screaming into hell anyway.

All the way back in 1966, the remarkable Carl Sagan was proclaiming what Seth Shostak more recently said, namely that finding extraterrestrial life was more or less inevitable. But he also said something that the others have not about such a discovery. It would change everything in our civilization. True belief preachers like Ken Ham would rant in denial till the end of their lives; apocalyptic preachers would multiply, warning all of us and kindling fear; Wall Street would roller coaster with immense uncertainty; many religious teachings would be tossed, or gripped all the tighter, and new cults would mushroom so fast that our heads will spin. Schools would have to reprint their textbooks pronto etc.

I rather agree with Sagan, even though he was writing long before Shostak, and even though the world has certainly changed a lot in the interim. The discovery of intelligent life outside our solar system is inevitable. And such a discovery will change everything. Fast or slow, the change *will be huge*.

And billions will resist that change with all their being.

Because change, good or bad or neutral, according to Rosabeth Kantor, always means things most human beings seem to find horrifying: a loss of control; too much uncertainty all of a sudden; the sheer queasy shock and surprise of it; fear of the ripple effect, ie. more change is on the way; more work for us, that is, more having to think and be more conscious instead of just floating along as we usually do, fears that we as the human race might be judged by such a new discovery, suggesting a loss of face. There would be resentments based on how many of our kind have treated other humans shabbily when they too were "discovered." And frankly, there would be the sheer pain caused by such a pervasive and universal impact, far greater ultimately, than the announcement by Copernicus and Galileo, to a nauseated Europe, that the earth was not the center anymore. And you may remember that the first person to suggest extraterrestrial intelligence back in those days, Giordano Bruno, was burned alive at the stake for saying so. *That's some repulsive resistance to change!*

Now, the parable you heard earlier from the Gospel of Mark, a simple tale for sure, tries to make this assertion completely clear: *It's all change, all the time, buster. Just grow up*. Herakleitos the Greek has said the same thing 570 years earlier. So did Buddha.

If you don't know *that*, they were all saying in their own way, you've been wearing a sack over your head, because the evidence is pretty clear. Seed to grain, planting to harvest. The farmer doesn't know why or how it happens, he just knows it does, and he works with reality as it is, not

as he wishes it would be. He doesn't try to slow the growth of the shoots, nor hurry the summer growing. He accepts change as the way things are, the constant flow of the universe as it is. The seasons change. New seed, new crops next year – or, maybe destroyed by a drought, maybe overwatered by the rain – we don't know, nor can we control it. But the reality of change IS reality.

We can even help *make* changes by participating in the natural structure of reality more deliberately. We can change unequal social structures, by fighting oppressions and the cruel harvest of caricature wed to power in the world. But even when we do that, we may have to keep on doing that all of our days, for resistance to change on the part of all who have wed caricature to power is great indeed.

As I indicated, Siddattha Gotama, the Buddha, preached the same thing as the parable of the farmer some 450 years earlier. He added that we human beings tend to be so resistant to change that we cling to things that are not good for us, because they help us maintain the illusion of changelessness and control, and convince us that our fears of change *are* the final authority.

The people in the Shingebiss story you heard Debbie and me tell earlier let their fears rule them as their final authority, and literally push them around (or at least Southward), until Shingebiss showed them there were other options. She was pretty courageous, wasn't she, to attempt to live within winter cold and wind when it had not been done before?

But I am not sure polishing up one's courage is the issue. Anymore than the New Year Resolution called "will power" is the answer to the extra holiday pounds that need to come off for the sake of health.

Let me unpack that a bit. The Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron speaks of resistance to change as "shenpa." She translates it, so we can understand it, as being hooked or stuck. She says this feeling of being hooked or stuck can be with us every day; it's as ordinary as breath, nothing dramatic, often unconscious.

Shenpa, Chodron says, *thrives on the underlying insecurity of living in a world that is always changing*. It's brings up a feeling generated by past experience – and we immediately withdraw from the present. Some one criticizes us, or one of our children, or we encounter someone who talks a lot, or not at all, and we feel discomfort – we may not even be sure why – and we react by finding some comfort, something that makes us feel better. Chodron puts it like this: *Someone looks at us in a certain way, or we hear a certain song, we smell a certain smell, we walk into a certain room and boom. The feeling has nothing to do with the present, and nevertheless, there it is.*

We all want some kind of relief from that unease, so we turn to what we enjoy: food, alcohol, drugs, sex, work or shopping. In moderation what we enjoy might be very delightful. We can appreciate its taste and its presence in our life. But when we empower it with the idea that it will bring us comfort, that it will remove our unease, we get hooked.

That, folks, is a passage I could meditate on for years.

I had a wonderful conversation this week with member Amy Watson, who, sadly, could not be here today to hear my gratitude for her insights. She reminded me that most of us are raised to value comfort. We don't sleep on a bed of nails, we sleep on a comfy mattress. We don't eat food we don't like, we eat food we *do* like and we even call it "comfort" food sometimes. Affection is wonderful – especially after a hard day. Takes the edge off, some folks say. We are understandably raised to be committed to comfort, not discomfort. Phrases we may have heard when we were younger like: "Finish all the food on your plate, young lady. It's wrong to throw food away!" or "For goodness sake, don't you have sense enough to come in out of the rain? What's wrong with you? Get in here before you catch your death of cold, young man!" help to keep our commitment to comfort – and our ability to freeze back into that moment when we hear a criticism or get pushback in the present moment.

Amy spoke with me about *competing commitments*. Another rich phrase worth meditating on. Competing commitments. I am committed to giving away a lot at Christmas time, to charities, to family and friends, because giving is a joy for my heart and soul, *and*, I get so stressed out, because of the changes in my calendar (shopping, a thousand parties), which then leave me almost delirious by Dec. 26th.

So, besides being committed to generosity, I am committed to my comfort as well. And what's wrong with a plate of comfort food the day after Christmas? Makes me feel good. Nothing wrong with that, is there?

I can righteously bring up "willpower," and talk about how I "shouldn't" eat comfort food, but raw kale instead, but to me that approach simply echoes the good boy/bad boy idea associated with

Santa Claus. If I eat kale, I am good. If I eat a chocolate truffle, I am bad.

But the competing commitments idea really makes a lot more sense to me. I am committed to my health and my comfort at the same time. They collide, and the result is very often guilt, blame, paralysis, or, to use Chodron's word, I get "hooked," and get obsessive trying to keep both commitments equally.

What I have to do is to reflect on those two commitments, disentangle them, and move forward from there, a little more awake than I was before.

No magic bullet here – this kind of reflection has to be as "daily" as the stickiness of being hooked. Or breathing perhaps. The unconscious has to surface.

So, here it is. Change goes on and on forever. Both good *and* terrible change. It's never going to suddenly stop.

But it's totally possible to work on our own attitude toward change, and the *shenpa*, or discomfort, it truly kindles, and blow out the wildfires that consume us. Buddha talked about Nibbana, or Nirvana. It does not mean heaven. It means "to blow," not like the North Wind, but to cool something that's too hot. That's why he used the Pali word for "fuel" as his version of

shenpa. Our stuckness is truly a fuel that gets us hot and obsessive and grasping. And spending some time each day reflecting on our competing commitments can reduce that fire burning because of that fuel, so we can respond to the changes in our lives from a more grounded and awakened place.

And when some signal comes from the star Tau Ceti around the year 2040, and we learn we are not alone, and that a huge change is ahead of us, we might be able to say, "So what else is new?" and move forward with grace, gratitude and compassion for self and others every single day to come.

Offering

Returning

The winter slows us. The spring revives us. The summer warms us in our bones. The fall astonishes us. Let the bells of this song ring in the changes of the new year, the ones that make us more awake, more alive, more free. Tell the voices from your past, that told you that you can't sing, to be quiet. C'mon. Test the waters. Wade in. Find your inner zest. Give up being ashamed for a while. Come forward. Step up to the plate. Be glad to be alive, here and now. Sing!

Singing #56 Bells in the High Tower

Blessing