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Change and renewal

By Peter Sawtell

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Though most New Year's resolutions have gone by the wayside by now, their lessons can remain, IF they coincide with slower and deeper change.



While sudden conversions in belief and behavior can happen, most of us will move slowly through deep changes. Religious educator Katherine Turpin writes about "ongoing conversion" as more realistic than sudden transformation.

An old hymn makes the point that "new occasions teach new duties; time makes ancient good uncouth." Major changes in how we think and live will be instinctive and durable when they align with a changed awareness about the world and our place in it. We'll know that our hoped-for new beginnings have come when what was once normal and treasured becomes grating and uncouth.

At the church where I am a member, the children's story during worship is often a "secular" children's book. A long-time favorite book has been Miss Rumphius – a lovely story about a woman's intentional and unconventional life seeking adventure and meaning. The last and most challenging of her goals is to spread beauty in the world. She finally achieves that by scattering flower seeds across her English countryside.



Last spring, as the narrative concluded with her sowing of lupine seeds, I saw quite a few people squirming in their seats. After church, as we slurped coffee and munched cookies, we talked about our discomfort.

"Miss R. was spreading an invasive species, wasn't she?" was the gist of the comments. The lupines that she seeded took over the hillsides, displacing other plants, and disrupting the ecosystem. Other people listened in to our coffee hour conversation, and they, too, quickly realized the implications of Miss Rumphius' attempt to beautify the world.

Our increasing awareness of ecological relationships and fragile habitats made a favorite and familiar story less appealing. There is

much about the story that is wonderful -- her setting of life breaking out of social expectations, and questing for beauty the world. But the thoughtless sowing of flowers without an appreciation for environmental impact doesn't sound nice anymore. That form of spreading beauty is not something that we want to teach our kids, at least not without some serious discussion. Time makes ancient good uncouth.



That reading of Miss Rumphius was a moment of new beginning for many. It was a sudden realization of our changed awareness, and of shifted values. Collectively, we have come to see a greater beauty in ecological health than in hillsides covered with purple lupine blossoms.

That change came slowly and quietly. There hadn't been a sermon or educational program on invasive species. Nobody led a campaign against the evil Miss Rumphius. Through the last few years, though, a growing and pervasive sense of being part of the intricate web of creation has taken hold in the church. Our theologically grounded awareness of ecological responsibility now shapes the way we hear a lovely children's story -- just as it leads us to pull things that can be recycled out of the trash cans.



That is what real change looks like. When a beloved and familiar story sets your teeth on edge, then you know that a different set of values has taken hold.

The disappearance of Miss Rumphius from church is an indicator that this congregation -- and perhaps the larger society, too -- is "getting it". The spontaneous reaction from so many members of the church indicates that ecological awareness is starting to be written in the DNA of the congregation.

New beginnings come slowly, and take hold in surprising ways. A rash resolution on New Years Eve isn't likely to be followed if some of those precursors have not taken root. On the flip side, a congregation's commitment to environmental stewardship will be lived more fully when the values and knowledge which shape that commitment have been affirmed and nurtured.

Real change in our personal beliefs and behavior, and real change in our congregations, is a gradual process of "ongoing conversion". Significant steps in that transformation will take hold when they build on an existing foundation. But when that foundation is present, then what once seemed good and normal -- Miss Rumphius sowing lupines, or power plants spewing carbon dioxide -- will become uncouth and unacceptable.

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RMC Reflections is a ministry of:

Rocky Mountain Conference UCC, 1140 W. 5th Avenue, Denver, CO 80204

kathy@rmucc.org Phone: 303-984-9118 Fax: 303-980-6695