

## That Which Changes, That Which Remains the Same

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I graduated high school on June 6th, 1968, fifty years ago; and so this year was the fiftieth anniversary of my graduation. I went to an all boy's boarding school outside of Pittsburgh. It was a third or fourth ranked boarding school—not Andover or Exeter or Choate, but still a rather typical boys boarding school—kind of a combination of “Tom Brown’s School Days,” “Dead Poet’s Society,” and “Lord of the Flies.” Yet it was a very important place for me in terms of growing up. I graduated from there and then went off to college, and then went back and taught history for two years at my old school. I later became a trustee of the school, and I am still now a member of the Board of Visitors.

Not surprisingly, when it came time for our fiftieth reunion, I became pretty involved in helping organize it. Much of that task involved being in touch with fellow classmates—trying to find them and convince them to come to the reunion. I had kept in moderate touch with many of them through Facebook and email, among other ways, and I was able to get in touch with a number of my classmates—but my senior class roommate appeared to have disappeared from the face of the earth. No matter what I did, I could not find him, nor could the school. We tried emailing him, and the emails were all sent back. He was not on Facebook or LinkedIn. Googling him turned up nothing, and the few phone numbers we had were all disconnected—no longer in service.

I ended up writing a letter to him at the last address that we had for him, and about a month later, I received a letter in reply. It said, “Dear Sam; I am not surprised you’ve had a difficult time tracking me down. I am no longer Bill James. I am Sarah.”

Sarah explained that she had always been gender ambivalent—stuck between two genders. Some of this resulted in drugs and drinking, and eventually the loss of a job and career. The letter continued:

“Today I am full of joy and contentment. Karen, my wife of forty-six years, has stood by me all along, and together we have experienced a depth and a richness in life that we never thought possible. I am humbled every day that the Divine Creator has given me a second chance at life—a do-over, if you will. I am a deeply spiritual person and have found a wonderful community of faith that is full of diversity.”

My response:

“Dear Sarah; how wonderful to hear from you and be brought up to date on your remarkable journey. I am so glad to know that you are fulfilled, content, and in a very good place in your life. I hope you and I can now stay in closer touch. As for the reunion, I think it would be great if you could attend.”

So began the renewal of a friendship of more than fifty years. My roommate had grown up in a very conservative background in a small town. Sarah's father was a college football star—a man's man. My roommate described her family as right wing, racist, and anti-Semitic. She had attended a small college that was conservative and biblical oriented. After college Sarah became a speech writer for Billy Graham, and then worked for Pat Robertson, eventually becoming a part of the ministerial staff for a megachurch outside of Pittsburgh, similar to nearby Willow Creek. When Sarah discovered who she really was, and came out about that, the church had no place for her. They tried to do an intervention and wanted to send her away for therapy. They attempted to convince Karen, Sarah's wife, to divorce her. Her brothers stopped talking to her. She experienced rejection from family, friends, and community. As we continued to correspond, issues of faith came up. Her church had, in her words, no room for her theology; no room for someone like her—and by extension many others who reflect diversity.

And so Sarah wrote, “we jettisoned that theology and that church, and we have never looked back. That experience became the catalyst for spiritual revolution in both of our lives.” She had moved on to a far more liberal and Protestant world, finding a spiritual home in a Unitarian community particularly in Lake Chautauqua New York., where she and Karen have a home.

After a lot of coaxing, Sarah did, in fact, come to the reunion. I had spoken to my classmates ahead of time, and she was greeted with complete acceptance and welcomed with open arms. I should say that our school was never a bastion of liberalism and acceptance, but over these fifty years, times had changed, and our fellow classmates had changed as well. It was a truly joyous reunion. After rejection by her church, her family, her community and her friends, she came to our reunion and was totally accepted.

Sarah told me that, following the reunion in early June, she and Karen were presenting a program at the Chautauqua Institution in New York in mid July. There was an entire week at Chautauqua devoted to LGBTQ issues. For those of you that don't know what the Chautauqua Institution is, it's a place on Lake Chautauqua, New York that is kind of a combination of Ravinia and the Aspen Ideas Festival. It was founded in 1874 as a Methodist retreat camp, but unlike Ravinia or Aspen, 30,000 people live there on the grounds during the summer! There are lectures every day, as well as operas, symphonies, jazz and ballet. It is very different today from what it was back in the 19th century Victorian era, though the homes and architecture are very much set in that time. But it is now a multi-faith place. There is the Everett Center for Jewish life, centers for Muslims and Ba'hai communities. There is even a Chabad house. The President, Michael Hill, is an out gay man. Gene Robinson, the Episcopal bishop from New Hampshire, is the director of religious life. Chautauqua is no longer “dry,” as it once was—they actually opened up a bar there last year, and people openly drink wine on their front porches without fear of condemnation. I am not sure about dancing.

Sarah then explained that the title of her and Karen's presentation was “Letter from Sam.” She hoped that Patty and I could be present—and so we went to Chautauqua. There in the Hall of Philosophy—a stage where William Jennings Bryan and Mark Twain, Susan B. Anthony, Amelia Earhart, Teddy Roosevelt and Franklin Roosevelt had spoken—Sarah and Karen told the story of their life. Their marriage, their struggles and challenges, and their joys. And then they turned to me.

Sarah asked me some key theological questions, specifically how did Jews understand the biblical laws concerning homosexuality? I explained that Jews are interpreters, not fundamentalists or literalists, and that Leviticus 18 is a line or two in the bible. We're not even sure how to exactly translate it, or what exactly it means. But the preponderance of biblical teaching is completely opposite to Leviticus 18. The core biblical teaching is of accepting the outcast, the stranger, the pariah, the other. Both Jesus and Hillel, when asked to summarize all of the Torah, both said the same thing, quoting from Leviticus 19: "And you shall love your neighbor as yourself." That's the whole Torah, all the rest is commentary.

But most often, I go back to the story of creation. Many of you have heard me say this—but this was a new audience, so I was able to say it again. We are "adam", from "adamah"—that is the creation story. "Adam", human, from "adamah", earth. And then God breathes into each one of us "ruach Elohim", the breath of God. Therefore we are God containers, each and every one of us. That's our nature—that's who we are. God's breath animates us. It is our spirit, our soul, our consciousness. And it is constant and it is unchanged, and that is what defines us. When we think about ourselves—from the littlest child to the most elderly—we think of ourselves as being the same person we have always been, because our spirit, the breath of God, has not changed. The vessel itself may change in great ways. We can grow bald and fat; we can lose a limb, have a mastectomy. We can age in many different ways. And yet who we are, as containers of the Divine, remains a constant. Our soul, our spirit, our essence does not change—and so too with my friend Sarah James. There was a radical change in her exterior appearance, but she remains the same person that she was when she was my roommate in 1967 and 1968.

I told a story ascribed to Michelangelo. That Michelangelo said that he had not so much carved David out of the marble, but, rather, he had released David from within, freeing David from the stone. So the real Sarah was released from the confines of the physical form of Bill. Freed from the confines of the clay stuff.

That was a nice story. It is a personal story of my friendship. But I want to suggest to you a couple of universal truths, ones that apply to each one of us. In the last number of years, we have been made far more aware that gender and sexuality are not binary. We live on a spectrum of identity as well. Life and identity are not black and white—not even in terms of human color. It is not just male and female. I remember in 1980 William Sloane Coffin teaching that the truest women's liberation would occur when the female in each male was allowed to emerge and be free. Sexuality and gender are a spectrum of gay and straight—there is nuance and ambiguity and gray areas. So too our faith identity is often not binary. Certainly in many of our homes and families exclusive definitions of faith no longer completely work. For some it means celebrating Christmas and Hanukkah, Easter and Passover. Many of us are influenced in our intellectual and theological life by teachings of Buddhism, Baha'i, or Islam. Some of you here this evening were raised in an environment where it would have been unheard of, inconceivable to be in a synagogue celebrating Yom Kippur. And for some of you, and I am often deeply touched by this fact, I am your only spiritual clergy, even though you are not Jewish. And sometimes that extends to parents and other family members, for weddings, illness, and death.

Let me offer a second understanding from that experience with Sarah. We each contain the breath of the divine in us no matter what happens in the clay stuff that goes through these radical

changes. That story of Michelangelo and David applies to each one of us. What is true for Sarah James is also true for each of us. What is our true being? How do we chisel away at the facades that hide our essence not only from the view of others, but from our own awareness and acknowledgement? When do we become the sculptors of our own masterpieces of life? Ultimately that is the task of Yom Kippur—to discover who we truly are, to recognize what is the best, most noble, truest manifestation of ourselves. How do we fully realize the divine breath within our souls? How do we accept and embrace others on their own journey of discovery? How can we recognize our own authentic selves? When are we going to allow ourselves to be our own Michelangelo, freeing ourselves from the confines of the hardened stone material to allow ourselves to be works of beauty and meaning?

When we are able to do that, our own personal masterpiece of life becomes our own truest blessing--and so may we spend these hours in discovery here, so that this next year become one of greater sweetness, fulfillment and blessing.

Amen.