

**“The Numbers Game” * Rev. Erika Hewitt
4 May, 2008 * Live Oak UU Congregation**

Reading: 1 Esdras 5:56-65, abridged

This book, also known as Ezra, tells the story of the return of the Jewish people from Babylonian exile. The temple had been destroyed half a century earlier, but they rebuilt the Second Temple in about 515 BCE.

In the second year after their coming to the temple of God in Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel...and Jeshua...made a beginning, together with their kindred and the levitical priests and all who had come back to Jerusalem from exile; and they laid the foundation of the temple of God on the new moon of the second month in the second year...They appointed the Levites who were 20 or more years of age to have charge of the work of the Lord. And Jeshua arose, and his sons and kindred...all the Levites, pressing forward the work on the house of God with a single purpose.

So the builders built the temple of the Lord. And the priests stood arrayed in their vestments, with musical instruments and trumpets,... praising the Lord and blessing him...; they sang hymns, giving thanks ...And all the people sounded trumpets and shouted with a great shout, praising the Lord for the construction of the house of the Lord.

Some of the levitical priests and heads of ancestral houses, old men who had seen the former house, came to the building of this one with outcries and loud weeping, while many came with trumpets and a joyful noise, so that the people could not hear the trumpets because of the weeping of the people.

Sermon: “The Numbers Game”

I missed you last weekend! I was in Del Mar, enjoying our Pacific Southwest District Assembly. It was held at a Marriott hotel, and my room was on the sixth floor, so I ended up making a lot of trips on the elevator. On Friday afternoon, I snuck back to my room to put my feet up for an hour or two; I picked up a magazine that I'd packed, and read an engrossing article¹ about...elevators.

Being more of an anthropologist than an engineer, I was most interested in how elevator designers calculate occupancy: they balance “how much space a person takes up” versus “how little of it he or she can” put up with. For all of their mechanical skills, elevator designers are subject to something called *proxemics*:² how people use space as a function of culture.

These invisible laws of personal space govern our unconscious behavior. In normal conversation, we Americans need a “personal distance” of about 20 to 36 inches between

us and the other person. If we don't know him or her well, that distance pushes out to 48 inches (naturally, the distance expands and contracts from culture to culture).

Because we constantly protect our personal space, the article explained, Americans instinctively follow the same patterns when they step into an elevator:

two strangers will gravitate to the back corners, a third will stand by the door, at an isosceles remove, until a fourth comes in, at which point passengers three and four will spread toward the front corners, making room, in the center, for a fifth, and so on...The goal...is to maintain (but not too conspicuously) maximum distance and to counteract unwanted intimacies...

When I finished reading, I walked down the hall to the elevators and rode six floors down to the District Assembly. We are a curious and utterly predictable species. On that elevator ride, as for the duration of the weekend, I watched the powerful law of "personal space" play itself out, as people stepped to the exactly predicted spot in the elevators.

* **From "20 to 36" to 80, Numbers Rule**

Twenty to 36 inches is one set of numbers that governs human behavior, even when we're not aware of it. Here's a number that unconsciously influences behavior in *congregations*: eighty. When Americans enter a room where eighty percent of the seats are filled, we see the space as "full" – and as an unwelcoming space, to which only the most intrepid visitor will return. Experts call this phenomenon – which is universal, across all denominations – the Eighty Percent Rule, and it goes like this:³

Whenever you consistently fill 80 percent or more of your seats, your attendance will begin to plateau. This is true for one primary reason: ...People aren't attending your service for its content alone. They want and need a good experience. They won't return unless they've had a good experience... Here's the problem. If you are at 80 percent capacity, you probably don't have more than one seat open in each row. A church with 100 seats generally has about 10 rows...With 20 open seats, it will be difficult to find two open seats next to each other...What happens when you visit a church with your wife but you can't sit with her? What happens when you can't sit with the friends who invited you?...I'll tell you what happens:...You go into the service frustrated. You're uncomfortable. It's hard to focus...You have a bad experience.

Over the past couple of years, some of you have approached me to express concern that Live Oak's attendance and membership have been growing only slightly. *Why aren't we growing faster?*, you've asked. I'm convinced, as are Live Oak's leadership, that the answer is the Eighty Percent Rule.

Just as our culture's laws of personal space dictate where you stand when you enter an elevator, those laws are lead newcomers to think, when they walk into this home of ours and see only a scattering of hard-to-reach seats, "There's no room for me here."

Look around you right now and notice how many people are inside of your twenty-to-thirty-six-inch bubble of "personal space." How many more people did you get that close to just to find your seat?

I know how much you long-time members love one another. You're a huggy people. Live Oak is a touchy-feely place. It's admirable that you consider these "bodies" your dear friends, and that you might even *like* rubbing shoulders with them. That level of caring and affection is part of what makes this community's warmth palpable to newcomers. There's a "buzz" of feeling comfortable with each other.

Now: Imagine being new, and *not* knowing the people whose shoulders are brushing yours. Imagine being driven out of your familiar Sunday routine, pushed – by emotional pain, or spiritual longing, or another need – to risk being "the stranger" amidst community. Not all newcomers come to us because they're hurting, but some of them do (did you?), and the discomfort of crowding adds to their distress. Other guests arrive with family members or friends, and most Sundays I watch them squeeze into the far corners (onto those wooden benches that pinch you-know-where), or climb over people to get to chairs.

This is not the warm embrace of welcome that we desire to offer to our visitors – or to each other. "Live Oak is a liberal religious community **welcoming all**," our mission statement says. We want to provide a spiritual home for **all** who seek our ministry. We know that there are people in our community who want and need the life-enriching – live-saving – message of Unitarian Universalism. And the newcomers who arrive, we know, will not always be anonymous; they will become beloved to us.

* **The Decision**

What to do? Conveniently – *joyfully* – construction of our new sanctuary building is underway. With its 200 seats, we know that a truly welcoming space awaits us. But until the building is complete, our growth is compromised by holding one overcrowded worship service each week. To welcome newcomers into our congregation, we must create more room *for all of us* as soon as possible.

I'm proud of your leadership – your Board, your Worship Committee, your staff – for creating a bold vision, and backing up their shared vision with action. As all Live Oak members were informed in a letter this week, we've decided to make room for growth to occur now(...-ish), and to build a bridge into our new sanctuary. In September, for about 5 months (or until construction is complete), we will hold *two* worship services on Sunday mornings. The hope is that by welcoming people over the course of the fall and winter, our growth will be a steady stream, rather than arrive as a tidal wave once our doors open.

This is an exciting plan, I think, ripe with new growth and new possibilities for Live Oak. But as unanimous as Board, Worship, and leadership support is, I suspect that not all of you will be enthusiastic about this change. Change is *hard* – as is the transition that accompany change.

Let me parse this distinction: *change* is external – the circumstances outside of us, like our moving to two worship services. *Transition*, on the other hand, is internal; it's how our inner tectonic plates shift into place. A change might happen overnight, but the transition inside of our minds, our hearts, our souls, unfolds at its own pace.

We want to ensure that all of you have time to process both this outer change, and the transition towards it. Today, in fact, following worship, we'll hold a Listening Circle to provide space for you to voice feelings about moving to two worship services. All are welcome to join your Committee on Shared Ministry and me as we listen to your initial feelings about this change...because we're swimming in it.

“Change” at Live Oak isn't restricted to changing the form of our worship. “Change” is yawning up at us from the giant hole in the ground, where the hillside awaits our sanctuary's foundation. “Change” surrounds us in the new faces who have begun to make their home at Live Oak on Sunday mornings. It's a lot to get used to. I understand that it is. Perhaps, like me, you needed no explanation during this morning's reading: the people rejoiced as the Second Temple was built in Jerusalem...but the elders who remembered the first temple gazed upon it, and wept.

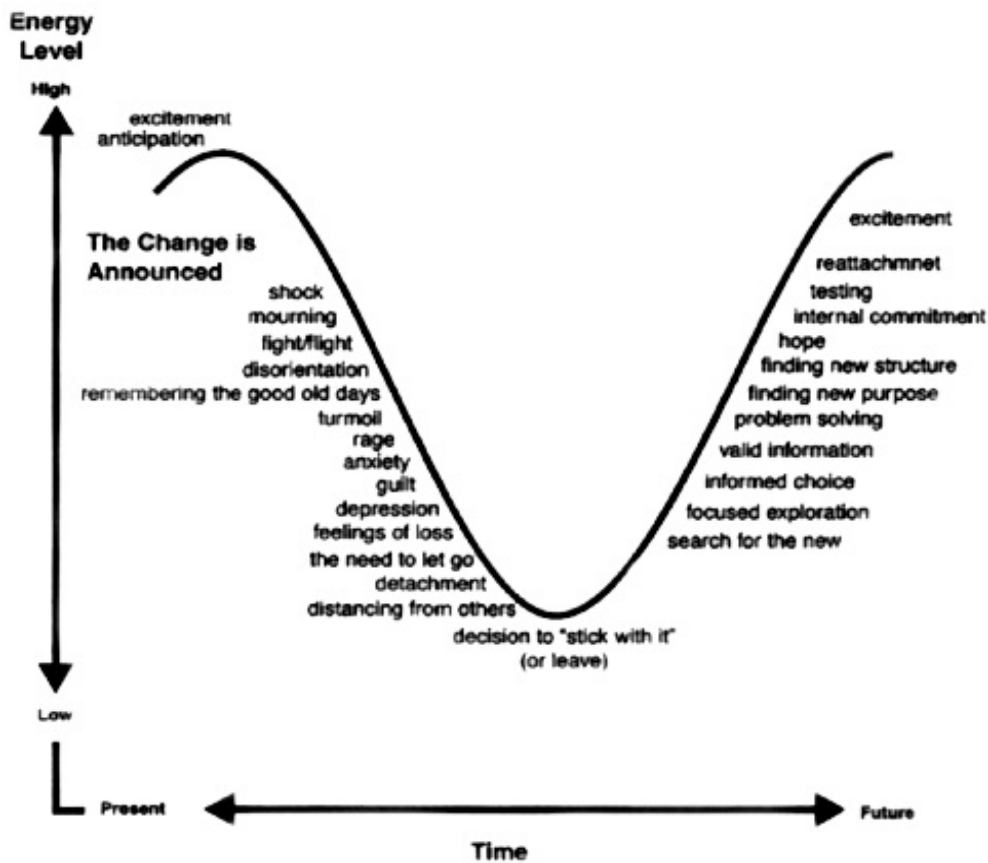
* **The Roller Coaster of Change**

Whether the changes at Live Oak have rattled you – or whether they don't disturb you in the least – I want to offer you a tool for framing *transition*: our inner responses to change around us.

I'm about to show you a model developed by Gil Rendle,⁴ a minister and consultant who's worked with congregations of every denomination. Rendle calls his model the “roller coaster of change,” and it suggests the natural progression of feelings that accompany **any** change, whether it's personal or institutional, positive or negative.

Before I show you the “roller coaster,” let's remove this from our Live Oak context: think back to a time of great change in your life...begin at the point where you first received news of this change and begin to recall the feelings you experienced as you lived through the change.

Hold that experience in your memory as I share this model with you:



As you can see, when a change is announced, energy level goes up (net energy, whether “positive” or “negative”). As you adjust to the change, there’s a letting go, an ambivalence, as feelings of loss cement the fact that “something” is ending.

As we trace this roller coaster over time, know that this model “is not definitive; that is, it doesn’t include all of the feelings and reactions that someone may experience...Nor is the sequence of feelings and reactions meant to suggest that there is a clear movement from feeling to feeling in the order listed.”⁵ But it’s likely that over time, if we make it past the point of “sticking with it,” our emotional energy will sweep back up, bringing hope and acceptance. Over time, we can even feel excited. We can own the change and its place in our lives.

So: be where you are. That’s what your leadership and I want you to hear: be where you are, whether you’re coming down the left or rising up the right. We’ll be here, listening to you. We won’t persuade, convince, or otherwise drag you over to the right side – but are happy to share our vision and excitement about the new shape of worship, and our new building, and our growing membership.

We'll share with you, if you ask, our enthusiasm for this set of numbers:

Live Oak's current membership: 128

Seating capacity in our new sanctuary: 200

Estimated number of Sundays we will hold two worship services: 25

And, with apologies to a major credit card company...

Being able to welcome people into our thriving, loving, joy-filled congregation: *priceless*.

Endnotes

1. "Up and Then Down," by Nick Paumgarten. *The New Yorker*, April 21, 2008, pp. 106-115.
2. Sociologist Edward Hall pioneered the study of proxemics in the 1960s.
3. From *Simply Strategic Growth: Attracting a Crowd to Your Church* by Tim Stevens & Tony Morgan, pp. 191-192.
4. Gil's "roller coaster of change" model was first adapted from Ralph Hirschowitz by Susan Hassinger, United Methodist bishop in the Boston area.
5. Gil Rendle, *Leading Change in the Congregation*, p. 110.