

***After a long dry spell I decided to write again.  
CHANGE is the spice of life.***

## **CHANGE**

**Stewart Hendrickson**

November 13, 2021, Seattle

*“There can be no life without change, and to be afraid of what is different or unfamiliar is to be afraid of life.” – Theodore Roosevelt*

*“Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.” – George Bernard Shaw*

*“If life were predictable it would cease to be life, and be without flavor.” Eleanor Roosevelt*

*“It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.”- Charles Darwin*

Life is a series of changes. Whether we like it or not, they are often impossible to avoid. We are born. We come into a new world. We have no choice. What happens then are a series of changes, initially not of our own choosing, but soon we make our own choices. We can be rebellious or flow with the tide. We can let others make choices for us or we can follow our own path. Change is up to us.

I was only a year old when my mother wrote this letter to her sisters in 1938:

*“Dear Aunts, I am so very busy that I never get time to do anything but cook, clean house, wash clothes and care for the children. It’s an all time job and believe me, I have to be on the job every minute. Stewart is so darling, but can also be so naughty. We have a puppy for him and now I don’t know who makes more work for me, Stewart or the puppy or both. The puppy is not allowed in the house, but every chance he gets, he sneaks in and many times the children hold the door open so he can come in. We used to keep him in the kitchen at night, but now he is two months old and must sleep on the back porch (which is enclosed part way). I took both children to see Santa and such a time I had with Stewart. He wanted every toy he saw and yelled at the top of his lungs when I wouldn’t let him take any. If he’s already such a handful at a year and a half, what will he be at three or ten or twenty? I only hope I can manage him. Much love, Lucile.”*

My course of life began and what followed would be my own story.

I progressed through school in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles. At age eight I began violin lessons. My older sister was taking piano lessons and she hated it. After I was picking up her piano tunes by ear, I was given piano lessons, but I had no great interest in that. When my dad suggested violin – he had played a little as a kid in Wisconsin – I took to that with interest, my own choice. Later in junior high I developed other interests and decided to give up violin. I was tired of forever trying to learn to play a certain Mozart violin concerto. When I told my school orchestra conductor, he begged me to continue, but I choose to stop. It was my own choice, which I deeply regret now that I am older.

In high school I excelled in math and science, with an interest in chemistry. To appease my father, who wanted me to become a medical doctor like him, I decided to become a biochemist. I had no idea what a biochemist did, but it was my decision. As a senior, I wrote in our yearbook that I was going to Pomona College and study biochemistry. Later when I reconnected with my best friend in high school, he was amazed at what I had done – “you said you were going to become a biochemist, and you did!” Not many kids at that age would make such a decision and then follow through with it.

Life at that age was all about change – going to college, getting married, finishing graduate school, a postdoctoral year at U. C. Berkeley, and starting my first real job. For the most part, I just went with the flow. It was an easy route, and I avoided going to Vietnam.

My first real job was as a Research Chemist at the U. S. Department of Agriculture Western Regional Lab in Albany, just north of Berkeley. I could stay on for another year as a postdoc at Berkeley, but with a growing family – twin daughters in diapers and an older son – the higher salary was welcome, and it didn't bring much of a change. We enjoyed living in the Bay Area. Once you landed a job in government, you could stay there for your whole career – there was a standing joke at the lab that some people spent their whole career looking out the window at Albany Hill and it hadn't moved an inch. I could do pretty much what I wanted in the lab, but it wasn't that satisfying as there wasn't much support from my supervisor. I spent two years there and during the second year began looking for another job.

In the post-Sputnik era, jobs in science were plentiful. I interviewed for two academic positions, one at the University of New Mexico and another at Arizona State University. I was offered a job at New Mexico, which I turned down, but not at Arizona. As I continued my search, a physiology professor at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School in Dallas wanted me to collaborate with him on his research. I wasn't much interested, but when he brought me to Dallas and offered me a position as Assistant Professor in the Departments of Physiology and Biochemistry, I accepted. This would be a big change. My wife and I grew up in California and were not eager to leave, but sometimes you have to go to where the job is, and I was still young enough to move on. After three years in Texas we were ready to leave – over half my salary was dependent on research grants and a new department chair was coming with his own people. So I started to look for a new job. Again, we were young and willing to make a change.

When I was offered a teaching position in Chemistry at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, I eagerly accepted. Both our parents had come from Wisconsin and we were comfortable living in the Upper Midwest. After three years, I was given tenure and we were ready to settle down. Tenure means that the college cannot fire you except for cases of moral turpitude (whatever that means) or financial exigency. While walking up the hill to the College one morning after receiving my tenure letter, I considered just coasting –after all I had a job for life. However, when I reached my office, I quickly disabused myself of that idea for both moral and personal reasons. I still wanted to grow in my new career – I hadn't given up on change.

During our twenty-eight years in Northfield we raised three children, sent them off to college, and enjoyed a good life. I was eventually promoted to full professor and we assumed an active role in the community. We had three sabbatical leaves, each after six years. Each of those involved a welcome change away from the College – this was the best advantage of academic life, salary was certainly not. After six years of teaching and doing research, a period of change

was necessary to refresh and reinvigorate my work at the College. We spent a year each at The University of Utrecht in The Netherlands, U. C. San Diego in La Jolla, California, and The University of Oregon in Eugene, Oregon. These changes were good.

When I came back from my sabbatical in Eugene, I began to have trouble readjusting to teaching. My research was going well, but the students had changed. No longer were they hard-working bright students from farms in the Upper Midwest, but they were lazy students from the rich suburbs who wanted to get all A's so they could get into medical school and become doctors with high salaries and guaranteed job security (it ain't necessarily so!). One might say they were adverse to change. I made the mistake, after a dismal exam performance, of telling them that there was more to life than that. I got in trouble with the Dean (most Deans are trouble) and I wanted to get away for a year. In 1994, I was offered a temporary position with the National Science Foundation, in Arlington, Virginia, as a Visiting Program Director, and eagerly took a one-year leave of absence. Other colleagues in my position at the Foundation had also taken leave for similar reasons. They were also anxious for change.

When I returned to St. Olaf in 1995, I told my colleagues that I was going to leave after one more year – I didn't know what I was going to do, but I would be gone. I would ordinarily have been up for another sabbatical and asked the Dean for a terminal leave after which I would retire from St. Olaf. My wife informed me that we could easily retire since we had a good retirement account with TIAA-CREF. I didn't believe her, but she was right. In the Spring of my final year, the College offered a one-time early-retirement buyout (two years salary and health insurance), which I instantly accepted. I had a new research grant which I could take with me to the University of Washington, where I was offered the position of Research Professor. So there! I made a big change, and we moved to Seattle in 1996.

At the University of Washington I worked half time along with my wife as my assistant. Our research was successful and we published more papers. When my grant ran out after four years, I chose to retire a second time – my competitive spirit gave out and I was not up to writing another grant proposal. The day I retired in 2000, I quit reading the biochemistry literature. I was no longer a biochemist and I walked away with no regrets. Fortunately, four years at UW allowed me to retire as Professor Emeritus, to continue with the Washington State Employees health insurance plan, and have free parking at the University.

I then began a new career as an unemployed (by choice) musician. I picked up my violin again after forty-five years of not practicing, continued playing guitar, singing, and learned to play several new instruments. Retirement, in my view, was an opportunity to do what I always wanted to do but never had time for. Some retired professors continue to maintain a small office in their departments, slowly fade away, and die after a few years. That was not my plan. Change was my thing.

During the years in Seattle, I joined a song circle, played at open mics, performed at the Northwest Folklife Festival, revived the old Pacific Northwest Folklore Society, and produced monthly concerts at a funky bookstore-coffeehouse-performance venue among other things. Our new life in Seattle was good.

Then in November, 2019 the biggest change in my life began. During that year my wife, Betty, began to have trouble remembering words, walking, and with balance. This culminated on Nov. 15 when I brought her to the ER and checked her into Northwest Hospital for observation. Betty was tentatively diagnosed with Lewy body dementia. It was fortuitous that my daughter, Krista, had just come to Seattle from the Bay Area in California for a meeting. She was a

tremendous help. We then placed Betty in memory care at an assisted-living facility here. After that, a whirl-wind of change began.

I very quickly realized that I no longer wanted to live alone in a big house in the northwest corner of Seattle. I contacted our real-estate friend and decided to put our house of fourteen years up for sale and buy a small condo. First we had to empty the house, fix it up for sale with the help of two great real-estate agents, and buy a condo – not a small task! This consumed all my time for two hectic months while I continued to visit Betty in memory care. I bought a condo in Ballard and moved in by mid January, 2020. I took a deep breath, began to explore my new neighborhood, and settled in to living alone.

Our house sold at the end of February, just a week or two before the COVID pandemic shutdown. Whew, good timing! I then appreciated the constant nagging at me to get the house ready for the market. I celebrated by taking myself out to a nice restaurant for dinner.

Then, life for me, and everyone else, suddenly changed with the pandemic. I had to cancel two upcoming concerts, but naively thought the pandemic would be over in a few months. That was not to be, and we hunkered down for the long term. It was a quadruple blow for me – Betty in memory care, our house sold, living alone in a new neighborhood, and now the pandemic.

Sometimes change is forced upon us and we need to adapt – there is no choice. I started to have my groceries delivered, quit going to the gym, avoided indoor places with other people, and wore my mask, although I still managed to go outside for long walks. Life was no longer what I hoped it would be. I quit playing music, getting together with my music friends to practice, and spent most of my time indoors with my cat – I was very lonely. This was the hardest part of my life up until then.

By late summer, Krista drove up to visit after I moved Betty into a loving adult family home in Shoreline. I started to play music again, this time only for myself. It is hard for a musician to play music alone with no one to listen or play with – there is no point to even practice. I then discovered Zoom. With the magic of technology, one person can play with their mic unmuted while the other remote players listen or play along with their mics muted. It is the second best way to play together. I joined a couple of Zoom music sessions, had a reason to practice, and met new music friends from Seattle and all over the country. That lifted my spirits. It was a good change.

With new vaccines coming out in 2021, I was fully vaccinated by early March and could consider coming out of my seclusion. I started buying my groceries in the store, and cautiously met vaccinated friends in their homes or mine. As more people became vaccinated and COVID cases declined in Seattle, I could reconnect with old friends and make new ones.

By late May, 2021, Betty's condition had somewhat stabilized. She was using a wheelchair, eating well, but her speaking was harder to understand. She still welcomed me when I visited and held my hands when I talked to her. She was about to be taken off of hospice care when she started a big decline. She began to sleep most of the day and night, stopped eating, and was bedridden. The hospice social worker urged Krista to fly up from California as Betty's final days were imminent.

On Tuesday, June 8, Krista, my son Matthew, and I gathered at her bedside. She was unable to speak, but was still hanging on to life. The hospice team (nurse and social worker), family home owner, and caretakers were there to comfort her and us. Before we left, we each said our

last goodbyes and told her she had our permission to pass. At 1 am the next morning, June 9, I received the call – she had just died. My wife and companion of over sixty-one years was gone – a major change in my life. Grief followed, although I had already experienced grief since she was placed in memory care. I will spend some time adjusting to this new life without her.

Then the delta variant arrived and our brief period of relaxation ended. I started wearing my mask in the grocery store and was more circumspect about getting together with other people. I felt more lonely and resigned to going back to earlier COVID restrictions. However, I reconsidered the odds of getting COVID while being completely vaccinated. My comfort level increased and I then did something which required courage on my part. I reached out to all my Seattle friends through an email. I was honest about my feelings of loneliness and isolation, and I invited them to join me for Sunday pancakes, other meals together, casual visits, and walks. I received a good response thanking me for reaching out. This resulted in Sunday pancakes with friends, my hosting a couple of dinners together with friends, visits, and an invitation for Thanksgiving dinner. This was an initiation of change on my part – something I'm glad I did.

Life is not a linear journey but it involves detours and changes of direction. There are cyclical changes through the seasons and a progression of changes in living through successive decades as we age. We cannot continue the same lifestyle but have to accept and enjoy change as our life progresses. As troubles arise along the way we have to meet them on our own terms, finding new ways to succeed and enjoy life.

My favorite seasons are late spring, summer and early fall. Winter is not one of them. I need to approach winter by finding new ways to enjoy it. A recent book by Katherine May, "*Wintering, the power of rest and retreat in difficult times*," uses winter as a metaphor for troubles and hardships brought on by illness, the death of a loved one, and other unforeseen circumstances. She examines the emotional, spiritual, and distancing aspects of life in cold and dark times, and tells how she has dealt with them.

A life full of change and adventure, along with happiness, is better than a long boring journey. As the remainder of my life goes on, I expect there will be other changes before I reach my final destination.

*Stewart Hendrickson (hend@stolaf.edu) is Professor Emeritus (Chemistry), St. Olaf College, Northfield, MN; and Research Professor Emeritus (Chemistry), University of Washington, Seattle, WA. He lives with his cat, Igor, in the Ballard area of Seattle, WA.*