The Times They Are A-Changin’
Earl E. Shelp, Ph.D.

Some of you, like me, are members of the so-called Baby Boom generation of post-World War II children born between 1946 and 1964. We are a generation that had a profound impact on American social life during our late teen and early adult years of the 1960s and 1970s. In many respects, we are a generation that continues to have a transformative and enduring effect on our cultural values, public policy, and lifestyles.

We are a generation that came of age at a transitional period of American history. Some of us were active participants in the so-called ‘counterculture’ (see Theodore Roszak, The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and its Youthful Opposition, Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1969) of the 60s and 70s which, on the basis of certain beliefs about American ideals of personal liberty, equality, world peace, and the nature of authority, questioned elements of mainstream culture, politics, social norms, and institutions.

Critics might argue that popular sayings such as ‘do your own thing,’ ‘turn on, tune in, drop out,’ ‘whatever turns you on,’ ‘sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll,’ and ‘don’t trust anyone over thirty’ were emblematic of an hedonistic spirit that animated the youth of the period.

Although these phrases express some elements and emphases of the generation, taken alone they are an impoverished depiction of the moral depth and scope of a social revolution in which young idealists were the vanguard. They may be remembered more for what they were against in their activism; for example, racial segregation, a hot war in Vietnam, and a Cold War with the Soviet Union. They should be remembered, however, more positively for what they
demonstrated, and in some instances jailed or died, for: peace in Vietnam, an end to the nuclear arms race, racial equality, women’s rights, environmentalism, and gay rights. They questioned the materialization of the American Dream and the authority of governmental, corporate, and religious institutions over daily life.

Their counterculture and the causes they advanced had voice beyond the slogans shouted in street demonstrations or chants during sit-ins at universities and elsewhere. Rock and folk musicians like The Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, The Rolling Stones, Peter, Paul and Mary, Pete Seeger, Joni Mitchell, Janis Joplin, and Bob Dylan gave the movement rhythm and lyrical expression.

Bob Dylan’s song, *The Times They Are A-Changin’* (1963), has been described as the anthem of the era. The vague lyrics acknowledge that turmoil often accompanies change. Nevertheless, the song is a call to unite for a cause, even though its course is uncertain, as each verse begins with a summons to individual groups in society to ‘come:’ ‘come gather ‘round people wherever you roam,’ ‘come writers and critics who prophesize with your pen,’ ‘come senators, congressmen pleased heed the call,’ ‘come mothers and fathers throughout the land.’ Subsequent lines in each verse describe how time and circumstance are transient. Life and its conditions are constantly in flux, as Dylan underscores in the last line of each verse, ‘for the times they are a-changin.’

Dylan’s timeless and repeated declaration that ‘the times they are a-changin’ could be a confessional refrain sung daily by caregivers who often have a heightened sensitivity to change. In the world of ill and impaired persons, and their caregivers, change seems unrelenting and almost always foreboding. Change for the better tends to be rare in long term care. More
often than not, a change in the condition of a loved one or a circumstance of daily life constitutes a loss and a wounding reminder that the trajectory for this phase of life is toward an outcome too painful to contemplate.

One might think that caregivers and loved ones would become accustomed to and expect change. However, it seems that each change along the path of caregiving comes as a surprise. And when it does, you feel broadsided because, at some level, you have adjusted to current circumstances, challenges, and routines. You hope and pray that your loved one’s condition will not worsen. You already feel stressed and tired. In your quiet moments, you may marvel that you have performed and coped as well as you have. You, also, may silently fear that you are not able to bear any more or can possibly provide even more care if required by your loved one. Nevertheless and despite personal anxieties, your love and resolve to serve as long as there is a need remains unshaken.

If we can agree that life entails perpetual change, we should not be surprised that change may bring joy and, at some time, will result in weakness and adversity that frustrates our desires, derails our expectations, and robs us of an imagined future. It is not a question of if change will come. It is a question of when and its effect on our lives. Change is an inescapable condition of existence. It is folly to believe otherwise. Life is, in reality, a series of changes. The challenge we face is to adapt to a force that we cannot defeat.

It is tempting for caregivers to focus on how bad this time in life is for them. This preoccupation is understandable. Prior to the injury, illness, or condition of a loved one, you probably were coasting along with daily activities and looking to an imagined future that did not include the responsibilities you now shoulder. Then, for example, he had a stroke; she became
confused; the pain was named cancer; the newborn had special needs; aged eyes only saw
around centered blackened circles; arthritic joints were crippled; an enemy’s weapon destroyed
a soldier’s limbs; aging bodies become frail and systems malfunction. Whenever the time or
whatever the cause; a loved one’s change added the title of caregiver to your role as spouse,
child, parent, sibling, kin, or friend. It is a role you did not seek. And, for many, it is a role you
sacrificially embrace because what is happening with your loved one matters to you.

As disruptive, stressful, exhausting, frustrating, threatening, painful, and frightening as
this time is for you as caregiver, one is well-served to try to understand the experience of
change for your loved one whose body, mind, independence, self-esteem, identity, dignity, and
life are under attack and losing ground, so to speak. You and your loved one are in a whirlwind
of change that affects you, respectively, in similar and in different ways. The point to
remember as you each feel tossed about and out of control is that you are together at this
time, bound by your love and commitment to each other, and that you share a goal of making
the best of a bad situation.

You call upon professionals, family, friends, and other resources to help you adapt to
the changes that are occurring. You seem to get busier each day attending to medical
appointments, insurance matters, drug store runs, shopping for supplies, and other tasks that
did not intrude into your daily activities prior to the change in your loved one which thrust you
or caused you to drift into the role of caregiver. A danger in the pace of appointments, tasks,
and distractions is that attending to the routines of caregiving as you strive to be the perfect
caregiver, intimate, meaningful experiences and lessons for living unique to your relationship
and this time in life will be foregone and lost forever.
This time together cannot be repeated. It is, to invoke a popular phrase, your ‘new normal.’ It is a time you wish had never come. Your ‘old normal’ has passed. It is gone forever. You cannot go back to it. Change has this effect. It pushes us into a new present in which to experience life in a new way. Your unwelcome ‘new normal’ is a unique consequence of change. The circumstances and conditions of this time have come. It is an once-in-a-lifetime moment whether we want to understand and value it as such. This time is overflowing with moments and opportunities too precious to be squandered by a failure to recognize that they will never come again.

When you look back to these days, will you feel regret about questions not asked, stories not heard, love not shared, simple pleasures denied, comforting memories not created, or a loved one’s touch not felt. How can you and your loved one make the best of a bad situation and to not allow this time for you to be a source of future regret? Clearly, I do not know the details of your situation. I cannot, and it is not my place, to prescribe how you live through these days. Nevertheless, I think there is some counsel that may make this time more meaningful now, even perhaps paradoxically joyful, if we consider the life of a dog and a poet’s observation.

I suspect that most of us have watched Cesar Millan in his television series the Dog Whisperer as he rehabilitates dogs and owners. I confess that I am a dog person. Almost any cold wet nose on four legs will evoke an affectionate pat, if not a drop to the floor for some play time surely more therapeutic for me than the dog. But unless I digress with stories you don’t really want to hear about the three Cairn terriers that have blessed my adult life, let me return
to Cesar Millan who seems to be an insightful student of human behavior as much as he is of canine behavior.

An article about him prior to a recent appearance in Houston commented on how dogs live. Hear this quote. “People live in the past and future, but dogs are forever in the present. They keep it pretty simple. It’s people who are complicated. ‘They don’t rationalize,’ Cesar says. . . . ‘They live in the fullness of now.’” (Kyrie O’Connor, ‘Dog Whisperer: Pet’s not the problem,’ Houston Chronicle, Section E, pp. 1, 5, May 31, 2013)

If you have ever shared life with a dog, the truth of this statement is obvious. Dogs absorb the moment. Think about how they go for a walk. If on their own, there generally is not a destination for the outing. Each walk is an adventure in which the environment is experienced anew. They follow their nose. They stop and smell. They linger in each successive present and place. They are open to what each step, each moment, in their sojourn reveals about the world. Each moment is taken in for what it has to offer. Not a bad way of living, in my opinion, when we cannot be certain that there will be another moment or that the change inherent to each new moment will bring weal or woe.

My second source for thought about change and caregiving is the author and poet Maya Angelou. I discovered a quote, the source of which was not given, that reflects, in my opinion, insight and wisdom about the human condition that I generally associate with experience and age. Angelou, now 85 years of age, said, “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but they will never forget how you made them feel.” (http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/5934-i-ve-learned-that-people-will-forget-what-you-said-people) Caregivers too often, it seems, become obsessed with a checklist of tasks and striving
valiantly to be perfect at completing them. Thinking that the highest priority for caregivers is getting something done is mistaken, in my opinion. Rather, I suggest that Angelou’s observation regarding the importance of feelings and their enduring nature should be given greater regard.

I wonder, at times, if a caregiver’s focus on tasks is a deliberate or unconscious means of avoiding the feelings, both painful and joyful, which might emerge if given opportunity. Are tasks more important than persons, relationships, and the feelings that define them? Are checklists more meaningful than lifelong memories? We cannot be certain what feelings will be discovered if, like a dog pausing and sniffing, we risk taking them in. Change pervades every moment in each season of life. We can attempt to insulate ourselves from change or, as Dylan’s lyrics bid all people to unite with the word ‘come’, we can engage change and be open to discover deeper truths about living that are inherent to each moment of change.

I am not denying that change may entail turmoil. Moreover, my heart breaks for the pain, worry, and grief of caregivers and loved ones as losses mount and time grows short. These are some of the adverse consequences of change in caregiving situations. Caregivers choose, by staying the course, to engage change, not flee from or deny it. They endeavor to control what they can and accept that which they cannot control. Caregivers and loved ones come to understand, in the words of Marc and Angel Chernoff, “There are things that we don’t want to happen but have to accept, things we don’t want to know but have to learn, and people we can’t live without but have to let go.”

(http://www.marcandangel.com/2012/06/08/60-quotes-change-the-way-you-think/)
A caregiver’s journey can be a lonely one. Often this solitude is self-imposed by physically shutting out caring family and friends, and emotionally shutting out the one for whom she or he cares. This is not the way it should or must be. The changes you encounter along your path will be negotiated better if faced together with your loved one and others who care. And, if the changes along the way are engaged with a willingness to learn about the human condition and the world, as well as being open to express and experience the feelings that infuse each moment of human relationships and existence, this season of life may be one filled with as much enduring meaning as it is unspeakable sorrow.

The turmoil that accompanies caregiving calls for a unified response, if it is to be met successfully. The particulars of a response in your situation are impossible for me to know and ill-advised for me to prescribe. But I should not conclude these remarks without offering a general suggestion about how to withstand the turmoil and negotiate the changes you experience.

I encourage you to enter into a covenant with the person for whom you care and include all others who have reason to share your journey at this stage in life. The terms of this covenant, this agreement and plan for action, are relatively simple, yet challenging, risky, and prospectively profoundly meaningful. The covenant requires the parties to unite, embrace each other, and sustain each other, come what may. The writers of a song recorded by Martina McBride explain this covenant simply, eloquently, succinctly, and powerfully as pledges are made to each other during a woman’s experience with breast cancer. Hear these words as a pledge to be with and for each other during these times that are a’changin.’
“When you’re weak, I’ll be strong
When you let go, I’ll hold on
When you need to cry, I swear that I’ll be there to dry your eyes
When you feel lost and scared to death,
Like you can’t take one more step
Just take my hand, together we can do it
I’m gonna love you through it.

And when this road gets too long
I’ll be the rock you lean on
Just take my hand, together we can do it
I’m gonna love you through it.
I’m gonna love you through it.”
(I’m Gonna Love You Through It,” Sonya Isaacs, Jimmy Yeary, and Ben Hayslip)

Bob Dylan’s *The Times They Are A-Changin’* described a turbulent era and was an anthem for a movement. Martina McBride’s *I’m Gonna Love You Through It* portrays turmoil in an arena of caregiving and may be an anthem for persons in this period of life. Let me suggest, in conclusion, that the title of McBride’s song may be a strategy and means by which you, your loved one, and others in your circle of concern respond to change during this season: pledge to one another to love each other through it. Try it; I think you’ll like it.

Earl E. Shelp, Ph.D.
Interfaith CarePartners
701 N. Post Oak Rd., Ste. 330
Houston, Texas 77024
Phone: 713-682-5995
E-mail: EShelp@InterfaithCarePartners.org
www.InterfaithCarePartners.org