"Can People Change?"
A Sermon by the Rev. Alex Jensen
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto, Canada
Sunday, November 15, 2026

To begin this morning, I want to open up about something I carry a bit of shame around… That thing is, I don't regularly practise my violin. Now, it may seem laughable or superficial, but for me, I feel a lot of shame around not practicing or giving enough time to my instrument.

Starting violin when I was five years old, I've struggled with maintaining a regular habit of practise. Maybe it's my prior history of a count-down timer on my music stand as a kid, or maybe it's a certain level of internalized perfectionism. That unless I can play something that sounds good or something I'm already familiar with, I'll start to doubt whether I'm good at my instrument, or whether I ought to play at all.

I'm no Joshua Bell or professional violinist. My goal isn't to become one. However, I struggle with this sense of perfectionism and needing to play perfectly, even when I rationally know that good playing comes from good practise. All of this has, to be honest, kept me from picking up my instrument as of late. As an adult, I'm worried about losing what I've developed over so many years of my life; a central part of my identity and a throughline for so much of it. And yet, I get caught there without making any change. My music stand sits empty. My violin stays in its case.

In this month exploring *Stability and Change*, we're looking at both people and change: The ways we try to make changes in our lives and world and what might be getting in our way. We're not just exploring change on an individual level, but on a macro level as well.

Much-needed change in our world seems hard to come by. Systems of war, violence, greed, and harm seem perennial for our human existence. As individuals, we at times fail to change ourselves in the ways we wish. The things we know we ought to do, or not do, and yet we get stuck there in repeating the same patterns, cycles, and habits. We inherit certain patterns and traumas that feel really hard to break free from.

While there's truth that we are many different people throughout our lives, in certain chapters and eras, there's also truth that there's much in us that endures and stays the same, whether we wish it or not.

The question I'd like to wrestle with today is *can people ultimately change?* I think science and our UU faith tells us it is possible, but it may not come about as directly as we think.

Our reading this morning from *Immunity to Change* gives us a troubling glimpse of our struggles with change, even when the stakes are dire. This is a book that I learned about in my classes for ministry on leadership and administration. It's staggering that when heart doctors spoke to their at-risk patients about the very likely possibility of their death, that only one in seven people were able to make a change.[1] *Just one in seven.*

[1] *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome it and Unlock Potential in Yourself and Your Organization*, by Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey.

© *Rev. Alex Jensen 2026*

It's not that these folks didn't want to live or didn't feel it was urgent. Any of us hearing this news would assume we'd spring into action to make a change. They care to change, yet something holds them back.

The book goes on to talk about our resistance to change like how the body has an immune system response. They talk about our resistance itself as an intelligent, self-protective, psychological immune system. Just like our biological immune system, this internal system works to maintain continuity, stability, and equilibrium. Think about us human beings as walking thermostats: How like when adjusting the room's temperature, there's a baseline temperature to which the room tries to return.

When we are presented with a change to our patterns and ways of being, our psychology responds with internal messages, assumptions, and other competing commitments that resist it. For example, with trying to routinely practise my violin, even though I want to practise more, internally I hear the messages of: *"I don't have the time to practise"; "I'll never be a good or strong musician"; and even, "I'm bad at making music"*. I'm already so committed to several things in my life: making time with my husband, balancing work commitments, and the other things I genuinely seem make the time for. Yet, when I look at my instrument there in the corner, all of this rushes in and knocks me sideways.

It's never so simple to actually make a lasting change. There's something deeper moving in there, too. When shame is live in us, it's especially hard to change. It too often gets the final word.

It might not be practising an instrument. It might be trying to quit drinking or cutting back on tobacco and cigarettes. It might be limiting your time on social media and doomscrolling. Eating healthier. Getting enough sleep at night. All of these can carry the shadows of shame and defeat, leaving us paralyzed or frozen in our shame.

The author and vulnerability researcher Dr. Brené Brown defines shame as "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love, belonging, and connection".[2] When we move and live in our shame, we believe we're already unworthy or destined to fail. We can't shame ourselves or others into being better people. Instead, shame short-circuits our ability to change and to believe in broader and wider possibilities for our future.

It goes without saying, but *life is really damn hard*. This resistance to change is only exacerbated by our struggles with addiction and the other many challenges we face. Where we are predisposed toward certain patterns and behaviours; how we truly only have so many "spoons" to go around.[3]

The other elephant in the room around change is the change we wish to see in others but that others are unwilling to make. Maybe we want a partner or loved one to make better choices. To start getting to those long-term projects. To stop procrastinating and to start

[2] "On Shame and Accountability", by Brené Brown.
[3] "The Spoon Theory", by Christine Miserandino.

© *Rev. Alex Jensen 2026*

taking initiative. Maybe we care for someone's health and wellbeing and wish for them to choose a better lifestyle. Maybe we even want someone to change who they are; that we have an idea of who someone could be that they aren't yet.

I don't know about you, but for me, I've rarely felt empowered to change when someone tells me what I should or ought to do differently. *Anyone else resonate with that? Just me?* It's not that motivating to be told what we're doing wrong or what we could be doing better at. In fact, we often know this already, like those other six of the seven who struggle to change.

Individual change isn't a moral failure or a failure of our own willpower to sustain it or power through. It's not as simple as Nike's popular phrase *"Just Do It!"* Even if we know someone's right and we know we need to change, our shame starts to bubble up right beneath the surface.

The human truth of the matter is we can sometimes be attached to how we wish someone would change, rather than seeing them as they are now. Age-old wisdom tells us that in order for someone to change, the change must be their own idea or initiative; the common phrase, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink".

For us as people, it's not healthy to cling to what could be over what is. It's also unfair to love someone and to expect them to change who they are in order for them to be more of what we want. The truth is, sometimes people don't and won't change. Change itself isn't always impossible, but it's not something to wager everything on in a close connection or relationship. No-one is changed from the outside. Change has to be their own.

Another bit of age-old wisdom tells us that, "When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time".[4] We then must decide whether to love and accept the people in our lives, flaws and all, or whether to draw new boundaries around what we will or will not accept. It becomes our own agency and choice in the matter, rather than trying to change someone or betting on their change of behaviour. Deciding whether to remain in connection or to leave if a pattern is toxic or harmful to our own life and wellbeing.

These are hard things we grapple with. These same pressures, I believe, don't just affect our individual lives; they affect our wider world. There's a sort of "immune system" on the macro scale as well. How these competing commitments and pressures show up in upholding and preserving the status quo as it is.

What's more damning are the changes we know we need to make in our world and yet we ultimately don't or even don't want to. Existential threats like climate change. Humanitarian catastrophes. Wars. Global violence Mass atrocities. Economic systems rewarding power and greed. We know these things are wrong, and we know they're even a threat to our very lives. Like the many generations of humans before us, we remain either unwilling or unable to change.

[4] A quote by Maya Angelou.

© *Rev. Alex Jensen 2026*

Can humanity itself change? Well, this remains to be seen in these areas of war, violence, and greed that we have yet to out-insist in our ways of being together. Are we as human beings destined to repeat these same patterns and fractures? Is there any hope for us to change and shift our ways? What, then, gives us hope for the future?

From our Unitarian forebears, we are the inheritors of theologies of human optimism. Ours isn't a tradition of total depravity and doom. Rather, our tradition affirms the great progress of humanity. In the words of the Unitarian minister the Rev. James Freeman Clarke, it's "onward and upward forever".[5] A contemporary of Clarke's, the Unitarian minister the Rev. Theodore Parker, also gives us the phrase popularized by MLK: "The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice".[6]

If we earnestly take stock in human progress and how things have changed for our shared world, we do have a bit to be hopeful in. For example, since 1990, the worldwide mortality rate for children under five has fallen by about sixty percent.[7] This is largely attributed to increased immunizations, better nutrition, and skilled professionals present at birth.

Likewise, for the first time in recorded history, the UN reports that over half of the world's population now receives at least one form of social protection, like healthcare, food assistance, or unemployment.[8] Still, 3.8 billion people in our world remain uncovered, but this is a wonderful achievement for humanity.

History also shows us this upward trajectory: legalized slavery is abolished in every country. There are still an estimated 50 million people living in modern-day slavery,[9] though legal forms slavery are no longer present in our world. In nearly every country that holds representative elections, women now have the right to vote. Dozens of countries have even legalized same-sex marriage. These are changes that past generations could hardly imagine.

This isn't to say things are perfect. They are far from. Moral change and progress aren't an automatic guarantee. It's why our tradition resists language of "divine guarantees" in general, as if progress will somehow be made on its own. However, change on the global stage does seem possible, with the willingness to change and the supports we create to sustain it.

We, ourselves, must be the ones to bend the arc toward justice. As Parker tells us, our eyes might reach "but little ways". At times, we may not be able to "calculate the curve" or "complete the figure by… sight". However, by what we witness through everyday human bending, the arc does indeed bend toward justice.

---

[5] "UU Sources, Part 5: Onward and Upward Forever", by Rev. Nic Cable.
[6] "Theodore Parker and the 'Moral Universe'", *NPR*.
[7] "Child Mortality (Under 5 Years)", *World Health Organization*.
[8] "End Poverty Everywhere in All Its Forms", *UN Stats*.
[9] "50 Million People Worldwide in Modern Slavery", *International Labour Organization*.

© *Rev. Alex Jensen 2026*

The bending of the arc isn't always a notable shift or a watershed moment. Sometimes it's a small shift or change for the better. Over time, these small changes are what compound to create the better world we still believe is possible. For both macro and micro changes, it's not raw willpower alone that will bring about change. Instead, we as individuals and as a collective, must become experts at building up better habits and dismantling the problematic ones.[10]

Small shifts that beget other patterns and shifts are known as "keystone habits"; the changes that, once made, make it easier to support and sustain bigger changes. Something as simple as putting your running shoes by the door, or making the choice not to have an item or substance around can support the patterns and choices you're trying to make.

Collectively, this looks like groups that pick-up trash and refuse at parks. It looks like witnessing at demonstrations for justice and social action. Even writing to our representatives or lobbying for social reform. These are small steps that add up when we all take them together.

For me, I might start bringing my violin to work! Or at least putting my instrument in a more visible place than in the back room. The more I can reframe my shame around it and instead move forward with small, baby steps, the more likely I'll succeed in changing. Again, these things are easier said than done. Though, while change and progress aren't inevitable, they're also not impossible.

To close, I invite you to think about a conscious change or shift you've been meaning to make. Spend some time with yourself and your own interior world. What comes up for you? What messages do you already tell yourself? What "immune response" might be getting in your way?

The authors of *Immunity to Change* call these our "big assumptions" that we make about ourselves and the world we inhabit. The way through isn't to defeat those assumptions. Rather, it's to test those assumptions gently.

Once you've identified those messages and commitments, then the question is what little step might I make toward the change I want to see in myself or in the world at large. I'll be doing this with you. This week, my stand won't be empty. You do not need to change the world overnight. However, one small step has seismic impacts over time. With one keystone just in the right place, like the effect of a butterfly flapping its wings, who knows what greater change might be possible?

Friends, with yourselves be gentle. Be compassionate. Be kind. Take it one step at a time. *The good news is the arc bends.* One disrupted pattern; one new behaviour; one practise and rehearsal might just change your life and the world.

Amen.

[10] "Creatures of Habit", by Shankar Vedantam, *Hidden Brain*.

© *Rev. Alex Jensen 2026*