

## **Change Your Mind, Change Your Experience**

A Sermon by Rev. Betty Kornitzer

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Sy Safransky, editor of *The Sun* magazine:

“The Birds have started to sing. They’re so easy to please. The sun comes up and they think they’re in heaven. There are clouds; don’t they notice? It’s chilly don’t they care?”

Friends, I moved to Narragansett in July. All my life, I had quietly nursed the sweet fantasy of living by the sea. I envisioned the pulse of my life somehow attuned to the movement of the tides

Well, today amid family photos and shopping lists, there’s a tidal chart on my refrigerator door. I consult it daily, you see, I like to walk the beach at low tide. But mostly, I walk by the beach at dawn. And, I’m not alone. There are a lot of other crazies like me, walking the Narragansett sea wall in the shadowy time before first light. Our eyes are trained on the horizon – watching and awaiting the morning’s kiss... and then a blush of golden pink lines the sky, and once again, we are hers. As if in unison, our eyes dance, always surprised by the rapture of the dawn. I understand those birds Sy Safransky wrote about – the sun comes up and I think I’m in heaven.

But then, it’s easy to feel like you’re in heaven, when the blush of dawn turns neon, and hot pink outlines the morning clouds. It’s easy to feel like you’re in heaven watching surfers dance along the waves, the blazing sun huge and rising at their backs. It’s easy to think that you’re in heaven bearing witness as sunrise surfcasters rock and sway, waist deep in the crashing waves.

Safransky had more to say about his happy birds: “There are clouds,,” he said, “don’t they notice? It’s chilly, don’t they care?” Apparently not. It’s like Gene Kelley “Singing in the Rain,” and dancing his heart out too. This is a reflection of my belief that peace of mind is not circumstance driven, rather, it is an inside job.

Scholars and sages throughout history have grappled the question of how outer circumstance effect our experience of life

Shakespeare's Hamlet noted: "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

And in the meditations of Marcus Aurelius, it is written: "Your mind is like its habitual thoughts, for the soul is dyed with the color of its thoughts."

Let me begin with a basic assumption here, and while I know it's not universal, it is based upon years of personal observation and empirical study. My assumption is this: Human beings long for peace. Even folks who seem to gravitate toward conflict live, nonetheless, with a profound hunger for peace in their lives.

The problem is that most of us simply do not believe that personal peace is possible. Unlike Safransky's birds, we're very busy noticing that the sky is clouding up, and the air's getting mighty chilly. You know, when I'm not watching the dawn over Narragansett Town Beach, life happens, and it's easy to become negative and see the world as less than beautiful.

Many of you may know that the word Gospel means "Good News." In the New Testament, we meet Jesus, who saw things very differently. Jesus lived in a world dominated by conflict and cruelty, where the rule of law and the social fabric were held together by brute force. By the very power of the love that he taught, and the force of his thought, he changed the experience of people throughout the world. It was indeed, good news.

And I'm going to preach some gospel here this morning.

There is good news, actually excellent news. Everyone can "Sing in the Rain," it simply requires a bit of an attitude adjustment. We have to make a decision to choose peace *always*. In short, Change your mind, change your experience.

No matter what the circumstance, the human spirit is capable of claiming its power to see things differently and to hold onto the peace. This is a kind of "soul freedom". In this life, such freedom is hard won and powerfully precious. It cannot be taken from us, and we can only lose it by giving it away.

How far can the power of thought take us?

A Russian priest, Father Arseny, prisoner #18376 was held in a Soviet prison

camp under the Stalin regime. In punishment for having given voice to his faith in song, Father Arseny was crammed into a metal box, his body all cramped and twisted. It was a harsh winter day when his prison guards dumped the Father's would be coffin onto the frozen plains, where he was left to perish. The priest's spirit, however, had not been imprisoned, there, and alone on the frozen tundra, his voice freely sang praises to his God. When, after 48 hours, his guards came to retrieve the box, Father Arseny had survived. We

have heard and read of those whose lives bear witness to the unimaginable power of soul freedom. We hold in our hearts the spirit of Anne Frank, who, while living in a dark and ugly time was able to sustain her vision of the beauty of humanity. The world is populated with many anonymous individuals who though physically captive, have remained soulfully free. They have decided to change their minds, they have decided to see things differently, they have decided to sing in the rain.

On a personal note, I had a very powerful experience of the power of thought last spring. When my mother moved to a retirement community, my sister and I undertook the task of cleaning out her home, and preparing it for sale. Mom was a collector of all things exquisite and mundane. There were hundreds of boxes of this and that, and not an empty square inch of space in the house. Needless to say this was labor intensive work. Considering some serious sibling issues, my sister and I cooperated surprisingly well in dividing excess furniture and artifacts between ourselves.

Except for the Buddhas. Mom had these two bronze Buddhas that had been with us forever, we loved them, they were family. The problem was that we both loved one of the Buddhas very much more than the other. And we each wanted *that* Buddha for ourselves. An interpersonal struggle arose that had family history written all over it. The irony of the situation did not escape us, we're relatively enlightened. We could even laugh at ourselves for arguing over a Buddha. We could laugh, but we could not let go. Neither of us could change our mind. We were miserable.

And then, finally, I visited the house, empty, save for the two unclaimed Buddhas. I felt torn and unhappy. Somewhere from within me, a wisdom arose, and I knew the answer. I had to change my mind, and decide to love the *other* Buddha. I approached the bronze figure with fresh eyes and an open heart, I prepared to fall in love. I was not disappointed. The fingers of this *other* Buddha have a certain playful grace, his cape a pleasing fold. I

decided to love him and take him home. Today, the *other* Buddha abides with me in Narragansett, reminding me of the good news – that when I change my mind I can change my experience.

Generally people believe that their experience of life is caused by external conditions. If only their employer were more generous, their partner more understanding, their vacation longer, the weather dryer, then, surely, they would be happy and at peace. Most people don't know how to sing in the rain.

Let's consider that this understanding of cause and effect is backwards and upside down.

I suggest that what we experience is actually a reflection of our what's going on in our minds. The old thought pattern justified my misery. After all, my sister wasn't letting me have the Buddha that I loved, I had every right to be miserable. That kind of misery was an old familiar companion, like in the Carly Simon song where she croons "*Suffering was the only thing made me feel I was alive, thought that's just how much it took to survive in this world.*"

Not so, my friends. In this life, some pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional. We have a choice, we can see things differently. We can sing in the rain!

Opportunities abound for seeing things differently. Recently I ran into a really nice lady whom I had met while I was house hunting in Narragansett. Forlorn, she asked me why I hadn't moved next door, and then told me that the house had been sold to professional lessors. All summer the weekly renters had come and gone, partying their hearts out, and now the URI students had moved in. She was miserable. I suggested that she might bake a pie, welcome them and see things differently. She nodded her head, saying that she had had that thought and then dismissed it. It was time, she agreed, to bake that pie. It was time to change her mind.

Changing our minds can also affect outer circumstances. We have heard of the phenomenon of the “Self-Fulfilling Prophecy,” whereby we attract the experience that our thoughts create. This concept can be summarized as follows:

- First we form an expectation of people or events,
- We subtly communicate these expectations with various cues, and
- people tend to respond to these cues by adjusting their behavior to match the cues, thus
- the original expectation is realized.

And so, it’s a good idea to bake those pies for the URI students in your neighborhood. You may be creating some good neighbors.

The power of thought to change experience is relevant in our personal affairs and in the world arena as well. The lesson that changing thought actually changes experience could be used to see things differently to end the stagnant and unyielding views that are keeping our world caught in the grip of hatred, genocide and war.