

Social hierarchies may disassemble and structures may fall.
Communities may revolt or tempt trust.
Tradition may falter or creativity crashes forward.
Leaders may step down or take charge.
The people may choose or refuse.

In between, storm predicted, the horizon beacons.
In between, theology of process reminds us to step back.
In between, where minutia and galaxies intermingle with microbes and mysteries.
In between, liminal, that space where we wait: Look, listen, feel, breathe.

MESSAGE *What Does It Mean to be People of Transformation?*

I love a good fairy tale. Always have. Stories where something that seems impossible happens...where characters who are stuck in particular roles or destinies experience surprising shifts...where someone who is ugly becomes beautiful, or someone who is poor becomes rich...when unlikely meetings or synchronicities lead to 'almost' unbelievable outcomes. Even as a skeptic, I love a good fairy tale.

As most of you know, I was raised in a fundamentalist Christian faith. There's a fairy tale-like belief central to that tradition...which is this: if when you meet Jesus, you take him into your heart...and it's like drinking a magic potion, or like putting on shoes with special powers, or like possessing a sword that makes you a great knight...if you do this one thing, you are born again, and born into a new and much better life, as a new...and much better...person who is better loved.

Now why it was, as one who so loves a fairy tale, I could not swallow that one, I cannot say. And I am certainly not here to claim that this particular tale hasn't come true for millions of people; I know it has. But it didn't work that way for me.

But still...isn't there a compelling lure, a shiny magnetism, in stories of great transformation? Wouldn't it be wonderful to be suddenly and substantively changed? (Well, I imagine that would be wonderful.) There's a story in the Christian testament that has always hooked me. It takes place some years after Jesus' death and is about a guy who never even met Jesus but after his followers like a narc after drug traffickers. His goal is to find them and shut them down. Then one day, this guy, whose name is Saul of Tarsus, is on his way to Damascus on a 'sting', when he hears the voice of Jesus, sees a great light and is struck blind. Three days later, his eyes are opened, and he is transformed...from Saul to Paul. Yep, that's right. Paul. A 180 degree turn. From a Jesus-hater into a Jesus-promoter, and from a persecutor of Christians into the person who does as much, or more, to shape and spread Christianity as anyone else in history.

I don't get hooked by this story because I want to become Paul. It hooks me because of the apparently easy and instantaneous nature of the change...although I'm sure those three days of blindness were traumatic. Saul was just going down the road, and suddenly something happened that changed him. Completely. 100%. And, as the story is told, he didn't have to work at that change. It came from an outside voice, and a great light he did nothing to generate. Sometimes I long for that kind of transformation, but nothing like that has ever happened to me.

Our UFP purpose statement, adopted a few years ago, says that here in this congregation we ‘foster personal transformation.’ As I recall, when the words ‘religious’ and ‘spiritual’ were met with too much opposition to become part of the final statement, these words...about personal transformation...were included out of a felt need that our statement reflect that we are a religious community.

While as a minister, I found this difficult, I also understand it. Many in our congregations have a skeptical or humanist bent who see spirituality as too imprecise or emotional to be credible. Others come here having experienced harm in the name of religion, and insist that we cannot be like that. Some have rejected other faiths in favour of this one, because those faiths had become too narrow. So, we all embrace this alternative kind of community, a much broader faith, and the words used by other religions to mean a particular thing...words like transformation and conversion and salvation, to name a few... continue to feel confining and impossible to translate. I understand.

Still, from my point of view, transformation refers to a positive kind of change, something the Greeks call metanoia...a change of heart, a change of mind, a change of character. Metanoia, or transformation, is the work of most, if not all, religious traditions, although it certainly can have different meanings. For example, as I’ve already alluded to, in some Christian traditions, transformation is likened to being born again, and is found in the moment of accepting Jesus as savior, for once and for all. In many Eastern traditions, transformation is a life(or lives)-long process of awareness and gradual awakening toward the goal of enlightenment. In other faiths, notably Judaism and Islam, transformation is understood to happen through devotion, study and disciplined practice, through which one becomes closer and closer to the holy.

So here in Unitarian Universalism, how can we understand transformation? As with everything else, it depends on which Unitarian you ask! And, this sermon, like really all sermons, is not meant to tell you what to think or believe, but rather to support you in reflecting on your own views and beliefs, that you might either embrace them more deeply, or change them as you feel the need.

Transformation. Here’s what we’ve got. On the one hand, we, as Unitarians, are firmly rooted in our belief in human possibility; the ability to reason, the willingness to be challenged, and the promise of growing to our fullest potential. Many of us embrace process theology, or a belief that all of life is in the constant state of becoming...always in process.

On the other hand, we insist that each person is worthy to be accepted just as they are. Out of that insistence, we resist any implication that we need to change or be better, as it can imply that we are NOT good enough just as we are. And we particularly resist this implication if it comes from a place of authority or power.

On the third hand, we often use the metaphor of life as a journey and liken our image of a diverse world of meaning to one in which there are many paths up the mountain...indeed there are many mountains. This relates to our principles which affirm an individual search for truth and meaning, and our desire to support one another on our spiritual journeys.

On the fourth hand...I suspect that each of us, somehow, somewhere in our being, knows that we are imperfect and fallible, and that we might find the need, at sometime during our life, to

switch course, to make a correction, or to take a different path. We just don't want anyone else telling us how or when to do that.

It's no wonder that the idea of transformation can be overwhelming or untenable...so much so that we resist it, or deny the need for it.

April's theme packet on transformation went out with Friday's "The Flame" and there are copies in the brochure rack as well. The first inspirational quote in the packet is from humanist and psychologist Carl Rogers. He said, "It wasn't until I accepted myself just as I was in this moment, that I was free to change." Maybe that's where we get hung up...we are so insistent on being accepted as we are because we're not so sure we are acceptable. And, we can't tolerate the suggestion of transformation because we haven't yet accepted ourselves? I don't know. Maybe that has something to do with it. I can say that as I mature as a minister, I more deeply understand that promoting the inherent worth and dignity of each...our first principle...is critically important, at every age, in every situation. It's key to this faith.

Another quote you'll find in the theme packet, and now as the tag line in my email signature, is a Zen Buddhist saying: "You are perfect just the way you are...and you could use some improvement." You see, our first principle doesn't stand alone. We can be worthy and still be in need of some improvement. If all were perfect, we would have no use for a spiritual journey, we would have no reason to search for truth, we would not have to seek a world community of peace and justice.

So, maybe this is all about accepting the journey, even when the goal is unclear. The powerful story of the Exodus is one example of a journey. By most accounts, the Israelites were settled, if not content, in their lives in Egypt. Even though they were slaves, they weren't all that interested in moving. But multiple crises drove them from their homes, and forced them into 40 years of wandering in the desert. Maybe some recognized the process of transformation they were going through, but as the story goes, many simply complained. For a whole generation or more, their lives were literally a journey, and that process has become archetypal in the Jewish faith...a central part of their identity.

What journey identifies our faith?

Well, our meta-story for life is that of interconnection. Our belief is that life itself is to be embraced and lived as fully as humanly possible, in connection with all that is. So when we look at life itself, we find many transformation examples that can inform and inspire us. Like the miracle by which a caterpillar becomes a butterfly...a process in which DNA actually changes...a transformation of the complete and total kind.

Then, there is the time-lapse-like evolution of the tadpole to the frog...when through natural growth, a being changes form until it becomes what it was destined to become...and looks completely different from where it started. I would liken this transformation to a process of becoming more fully oneself, even when that change is to something radically different.

Or, think of the way in which a tree makes sap, its slow rising and sweetening, and our human process of patiently transforming that sap into syrup.

And what of seeds? Are they not perfect as they are? And yet, given the right conditions, they sprout and grow into unimaginable forms. How did *that* come out of *this*, we ask? And those

emerging forms...those leaves, those flowers, that fruit, that bark...is eventually again transformed as it dies, and composts, and returns to the ground. And in every stage, beautiful just as it is.

Or, we can look at our own physical bodies. Our skin is completely new every 35 days and our blood cells are replaced every 120 days. We regenerate cells constantly, sloughing off the old ones, so that no part of our body is exactly the same as it was five or seven years ago. We might resist transformation, but as long as we live, we can't stop this constant biological process.

All these examples of transformation in life give us pause to consider what kind of transformation it is that we seek, knowing that they contain lessons and inspiration. Still, we need to find our own way to transformation, so when I read our purpose statement, and imagine my own transformation, here, what does that look like?

Well, rather than my usual default of starting from a place of insufficiency, I want to become a person whose focus is on possibility, seeing a future that is different than the past, one improved by our efforts. I want to increasingly see engaging in diversity as a gift that will change me. I want to become more inter-culturally competent. I want to better treat all people with more love and respect. I want to be transformed into a person who fully recognizes myself as a small but important part of something bigger, always in search of a path worth taking. And, I know it's unlikely that all of this change will happen with a single bolt of lightning.

I know that I am a person with strong Scandinavian tendencies toward simple hard work without any expectation of pleasure. But as I said at the outset, I do love a good fairy tale, and I grew up loving the old *Hans Christian Andersen* movie starring Danny Kaye. Here's a bit of a song from that movie.

(Inchworm, sung by Danny Kaye)

That's *Inchworm*. And its message speaks to me of the kind of transformation for which I long. My life can be likened to that of an inchworm, taking each next step, doing my job...measuring the marigolds, as it were. Step by step. Head down. Doing the math. Nothing wrong with who I am, but like Hans Christian Andersen's advice to the inchworm, I want to be someone who more often stops and sees how beautiful it all is. Stop and see. Breathe. Appreciate. Live.

I want not to resist the kind of rebirth that is possible in every moment. I welcome rebirth that awakens me to possibility, to beauty, to love. Unitarian poet e.e.cummings wrote, "We can never be born enough. We are human beings; for whom birth is a supremely welcome mystery, the mystery of growing."

Is transformation possible? I think yes.

What do you think? Do you long for transformation? What are you willing to do, or risk, to make it happen? Whatever your answer, know that you are beautiful now, as you are. And know that I am here, along with our whole community, in wanting to foster your personal transformation...whatever that might be for you.

It doesn't have to be magic, or part of a fairy tale. It doesn't mean that you need to be re-made or re-born as someone entirely different. It doesn't mean that you aren't enough, but rather that the world needs more of the person you are.

May we welcome the coming of all that we may become.

So be it.

READING *Ready* ~ Rabbi Rachel Barenblat

"So the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading bowls wrapped in their cloaks upon their shoulders." (Exodus 12:34)

You'll need to travel light.

Take what you can carry: a book, a poem,
a battered tin cup, your child strapped
to your chest, clutching your necklace
in one hot possessive fist.

So the dough isn't ready. So your heart
isn't ready. You haven't said goodbye
to the places where you hid as a child,
to the friends who aren't interested in the journey,
to the graves you've tended.

But if you wait until you feel fully ready
you may never take the leap at all
and Infinity is calling you forth
out of this birth canal
and into the future's wide expanse.

Learn to improvise flat cakes without yeast.
Learn to read new alphabets.
Wear God like a cloak
and stride forth with confidence.

You won't know where you're going
but you have the words of our sages,
the songs of our mothers, the inspiration
wrapped in your kneading bowl. Trust
that what you carry will sustain you
and take the first step out the door.

CLOSING WORDS *Blessed is the Path* ~ Eric Williams

Blessed is the path on which you travel.
Blessed is the body that carries you upon it.
Blessed is your heart that has heard the call.
Blessed is your mind that discerns the way.
Blessed is the gift that you will receive by going.
Truly blessed is the gift that you will become on the journey.
May you go forth in peace.