

Connecting

Connecting to deepened wisdom and deepened relationship

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2023 Dec

Transformation

Chalice Lighting

Words of Nia Peeples: “Life is a moving, breathing thing. We have to be willing to constantly evolve. Perfection is constant transformation.”

Check In

How is it with you today? How has the last month been?

Transformation in the Proposed U.U.A. Article II Bylaws

Section C-2.2 Values and Covenant

As Unitarian Universalists, we covenant, congregation-to-congregation and through our association, to support and assist one another in our ministries. We draw from our heritages of freedom, reason, hope, and courage, building on the foundation of love. Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love. Inseparable from one another, these values are: . . .

Transformation. We adapt to the changing world. We covenant to collectively transform and grow spiritually and ethically. Openness to change is fundamental to our Unitarian and Universalist heritages, never complete and never perfect.¹

¹The five other values named, with 2-3 sentences on each: interdependence, pluralism, justice, generosity, equity.

READINGS

Read these pieces with a pencil in hand. Underline parts that seem worth remembering. Be ready to share in your group meeting what you underlined – and what those selected words mean to you.

Goo

Rev. Meredith Garmon

In spring, butterflies emerge from the cocoons into which they went, as caterpillars, about a week before. If you were to open a cocoon midway through that week, you would find it filled with whitish mush. I do not recommend this, because it kills the butterfly-to-be. Still, I recall as a child that I did once open a cocoon. The mush inside is not a caterpillar, nor is it a butterfly, nor is it some in-between half-caterpillar-half-butterfly. There is, in fact, no recognizable portion of anything alive. It's just unpromising goo.

You might have thought that some logical and orderly transition was going on inside that cocoon: that the caterpillar's body was becoming sleek and segmented and wings were sprouting out of its back. But no. The caterpillar dissolves away entirely into goo. I imagine it wondering, in some dim gooey way, whether it should have remained a caterpillar.

From the undifferentiated goo, a butterfly begins to form. The transition's logic and order, if it has any, are invisible mysteries.

Transformation requires this courage: to let what you have been melt into a sticky puddle. To get from the caterpillar that we now are to the butterfly that we may become sometimes requires a goo phase: some time spent being nothing at all except a mushy mess.

I'm not suggesting that you consider deliberately deciding to be a mushy mess for a while. This is not a matter of intentional choice. Rather, we simply find that through no power of our own the life we have known has dissolved, and we along with it have become undefined and shapeless: an indeterminate mystery of limitless possibility.

If you happen to be in a goo-ish time right now -- or if you know someone who seems to be -- just keep in mind that, even though it seems that nothing is happening, quite likely, something is cooking. Inside the chrysalis, molecules rearrange themselves, following a DNA recipe far beyond the ken of caterpillar or butterfly. Inside us, too, in times when our lives seem to be goo, imperceptible rearrangement is occurring, beyond the ken of our understanding. Out of the opaque mysterious soup, a new life is forming. Have faith.





Transformation

Rev. Marvin Lavanhar, All Souls Unitarian Universalist, Tulsa, OK

The concept of personal transformation has become, for some, a trendy phenomenon that can seem more about exotic gurus, designer yoga mats and organic fruit smoothies than about living a soulful life of integrity and courage. Sometimes the purpose becomes hidden by or confused with the pomp and paraphernalia. A wise person wrote:

“... change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not. Change does not take place through a coercive attempt by the individual or by another person to change him, but it does take place if one takes the time and effort to be what he is—to be fully invested in his current positions.”

In other words, “the paradox of transformation” is that it is about becoming more fully who we are, rather than becoming something different. That does not mean that an addict remains an addict or an abuser continues to abuse or a liar becomes a better liar or a hater becomes more hateful. It means that we discover a deeper truth about ourselves and we find a way to live into that truth. It is helpful to begin a transformational journey by seeking our true core and essence.

As we live out who we claim to be in our covenant and in our statement of purpose, we find that by welcoming all who can abide by our covenant “with no test of doctrinal formulas,” we find our church and ourselves transformed. In our personal lives as well as our church, let us never allow our core purpose and principles to become hidden by, or confused with, the external trappings and surface structures of our community and culture. Like the caterpillar that turns into a butterfly, when we come to the messy, challenging parts of becoming who we are meant to be, let us have the courage to hang on long enough to realize our full potential.

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More Than Meets the Eye

Rev. Debra Garfinkel, All Souls Unitarian Universalist, Tulsa, OK

It should be a simple thing, really: acknowledge our human nature (not God, not in control), and practice looking upon the world through the eyes of love and compassion. However, as we know, it is not such a simple thing. There is more to transformation than meets the eye.

There has been an acknowledgement of and a fascination with the idea of transformation for as long as there have been human beings. What are the stories about gods who become human, or humans who become animals or stars, or animals who become people, if not stories of transformation?

As Unitarian Universalists, we agree to seek the truth in love – to practice being in holy conversation with each other in order to hear different stories and to learn of different experiences and to gain insight through different perspectives. When we are in a community that is in such a covenant we are challenged to engage with beliefs and ideas that we find uncomfortable. Inasmuch as we are able to respectfully stay present in order to grow in understanding and share in each other's concerns, we are in fact moving toward recognizing the divine spark within each other. It is difficult to perceive anything holy within someone whose story you don't know from her or his own mouth but who is judged by outward appearance and hearsay or a brief encounter. It is difficult to perceive anything holy in a world filled with violence toward the vulnerable and the innocent.

Love, Holy One, wholly given and wholly received, transforms: it gives us strength and hope. It was this transforming love that informed the life and works of Jesus of Nazareth. Love allowed Jesus to understand the extravagance of the woman who anointed his head with costly oil in the midst of poverty and scarcity (Matthew 26:6-16). Love is extravagant. Love shares because not sharing is not love. Jesus and Gandhi and Mother Teresa and Sojourner Truth and the Peace Pilgrim and Mrs. Westmoreland (my fourth grade teacher) and You Can Name Many More, all knew and understood the power and freedom of choosing to live as if there is always enough. Their lives transformed the lives of everyone touched by them directly. Their extravagant love continued to grow and transform through the lives of those people who then transformed the lives of people around them and so on and so on.

So, you see, we all have it within our power to choose to live a life of extravagant love. Really and truly, we are transformers already – for good or for ill. All it takes is paying attention, living each moment as fully present as possible, and recognizing the divinity in each other. It's as simple and as challenging as that. Now, when you look into the eyes of another person, wherever and however that happens, may you remember that you are a Transformer – and so is the other person. May you continue to practice giving and receiving wholly, holy love. May you discover peace and joy where you least expect it. There's always more than meets the eye.

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The Starry Night
Anne Sexton²

The town does not exist
except where one black-haired
tree slips
up like a drowned woman into the
hot sky.

The town is silent. The night boils
with eleven stars.

Oh starry starry night! This is how
I want to die.



It moves. They are all alive.

Even the moon bulges in its orange irons
to push children, like a god, from its eye.

The old unseen serpent swallows up the stars.

Oh starry starry night! This is how
I want to die:

into that rushing beast of the night,
sucked up by that great dragon, to split
from my life with no flag,
no belly,
no cry.

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²from *The Complete Poems of Anne Sexton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981).

Always Complete, Always Perfect
Rev. Meredith Garmon

The proposed UUA Article II bylaws urge: “Openness to change is fundamental to our Unitarian and Universalist heritages, never complete and never perfect.”

The assumption here is that completion and perfection would mean one had no further need to change. I think this assumption is mistaken. Perfection is not static. Perfection is, indeed, as Nia Peeples said, “constant transformation.”

My first direct and clear experience of being in the presence of a perfect human being came on November 2, 1980: the day my daughter was born. It was gobsmackingly obvious that she was in every way perfect. Two years later, her brother was born, and I was again confronted with a perfect human being. This is not an uncommon experience for new parents. In fact, new parents are the one group of people least likely to be heard saying, “Well, no one’s perfect.”

My children grew, and there were challenges. They became teenagers, and there were further challenges. But if I ask myself, “When did they stop being perfect?” I have to say, they never did.

By contrast, the official traditional theology of the Catholic church offers a different answer. At age seven you enter the age of reason and can make moral distinctions. You commit sin after that, and you join the fallen state bequeathed to us from Adam. This is not our Unitarian Universalist theology – and it’s not my experience. Oh, sure, my kids, like everyone, would occasionally do something that might reasonably be called a mistake – but it was a *perfect* mistake. It was exactly the mistake they needed to make for the person they were to learn what they needed to learn.

My kids never stopped being perfect – which made me realize that I hadn’t stopped being perfect either. And neither did you. Which means, as I said, perfection is not a static condition.

Perfection is dynamic. A newborn is perfect, and at the same time, we wouldn’t want zir to stay exactly as ze is for 40 years. Having the capacity for change, growth, and learning is a key part of what makes a person perfect just as ze is. So it is with every infant, every child, every youth, and every adult. Perfect.

What we aren’t, and can’t be, is everything. We have our gifts, and with them come our shadows. We have our vulnerability, our woundedness, our brokenness, and our limitations. But this is all part of our wholeness, our completeness, our perfection.

So if I could make a change to the proposed UUA Article II bylaws, I’d change that one sentence to: “Openness to change is fundamental to our Unitarian and Universalist heritages, always complete, always perfect.”

Transformation Quotations

Which of these quotations resonate with you?

Life is a moving, breathing thing. We have to be willing to constantly evolve. Perfection is constant transformation. — Nia Peeples

Don't ever empty the bucket of mystery. Never let people define what you do. It's not about zigging when you should zag. It's not about doing something unprecedented and unpredictable. It's just about never being a word, or something that is not in the process of transformation.
— Marilyn Manson

The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change. — Carl Rogers

The purpose of meditation is personal transformation. — Henepola Gunaratana

Transformation is a process, and as life happens there are tons of ups and downs. It's a journey of discovery - there are moments on mountaintops and moments in deep valleys of despair.
— Rick Warren

Changing is not just changing the things outside of us. First of all we need the right view that transcends all notions including of being and non-being, creator and creature, mind and spirit. That kind of insight is crucial for transformation and healing. — Thich Nhat Hanh

The way of the Creative works through change and transformation, so that each thing receives its true nature and destiny and comes into permanent accord with the Great Harmony: this is what furthers and what perseveres.
— Alexander Pope

When we quit thinking primarily about ourselves and our own self-preservation, we undergo a truly heroic transformation of consciousness.
— Joseph Campbell

In community, we discover who we really are and how much transformation we still require. This is why I am irrevocably committed to small groups. Through them, we can accomplish our God-entrusted work to transform human beings.
— John Ortberg

Rituals, anthropologists will tell us, are about transformation. The rituals we use for marriage, baptism or inaugurating a president are as elaborate as they are because we associate the ritual with a major life passage, the crossing of a critical threshold, or in other words, with transformation. — Abraham Verghese

Science is a way of life. Science is a perspective. Science is the process that takes us from confusion to understanding in a manner that's precise, predictive and reliable - a transformation, for those lucky enough to experience it, that is empowering and emotional. — Brian Greene

Up from the Ashes...

We need to realize that our path to transformation is through our mistakes. We're meant to make mistakes, recognize them, and move on to become unlimited. — Yehuda Berg

When people are facing a severe illness or a major surgery, that may be one of the most significant opportunities for spiritual transformation that they will encounter. — Allan Hamilton

I never told a victim story about my imprisonment. Instead, I told a transformation story - about how prison changed my outlook, about how I saw that communication, truth, and trust are at the heart of power.
— Fernando Flores

Transforming the World

Personal transformation can and does have global effects. As we go, so goes the world, for the world is us. The revolution that will save the world is ultimately a personal one.
— Marianne Williamson

Transformation in the world happens when people are healed and start investing in other people. — Michael W. Smith

A radical inner transformation and rise to a new level of consciousness might be the only real hope we have in the current global crisis brought on by the dominance of the Western mechanistic paradigm. — Stanislav Grof

For the first time in human evolution, the individual life is long enough, and the cultural transformation swift enough, that the individual mind is now a constituent player in the global transformation of human culture.

— William Irwin Thompson

We are witnessing an enormous shift of collective consciousness throughout the world. We are at the precipice of great transformation within our culture and government. — Zachary Quinto

[Martin Luther] King's response to our crisis can be put in one word: revolution. A revolution in our priorities, a reevaluation of our values, a reinvigoration of our public life and a fundamental transformation of our way of thinking and living that promotes a transfer of power from oligarchs and plutocrats to everyday people and ordinary citizens. — Cornel West

It is absolutely essential that the oppressed participate in the revolutionary process with an increasingly critical awareness of their role as subjects of the transformation. — Paulo Freire

We live in a pretty bleak time. I feel that in the air. Everything is uncertain. Everything feels like its on the precipice of some major transformation, whether we like it or not. — Sean Lennon

Every successful organization has to make the transition from a world defined primarily by repetition to one primarily defined by change. This is the biggest transformation in the structure of how humans work together since the Agricultural Revolution. — Bill Drayton

Christian Perspectives

Most Christian 'believers' tend to echo the cultural prejudices and worldviews of the dominant group in their country, with only a minority revealing any real transformation of attitudes or consciousness. It has been true of slavery and racism, classism and consumerism and issues of immigration and health care for the poor. — Richard Rohr

I hate how hard spiritual transformation is and how long it takes. I hate thinking about how many people have gone to church for decades and remain joyless or judgmental or bitter or superior. — John Ortberg

Without transformation, you can assume you're at a high moral, spiritual level just because you call yourself Lutheran or Methodist or Catholic. I think my great disappointment as a priest has been to see how little actual spiritual curiosity there is in so many people. — Richard Rohr

Redemption basically is about holistic health, if you want to translate it into modern parlance. What I suggest - based on the Christian tradition but not often preached - is that you can't enter into the fullness of the Pascal mystery of the redemption unless there is a radical transformation of motivation within you.

— Thomas Keating

We take what we think are the tools of spiritual transformation into our own hands and try to sculpt ourselves into robust Christlike specimens. But spiritual transformation is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit. He is the Master Sculptor.

— Jerry Bridges



A Spiritual Exercise: Make One Change

The Indian author and activist, Shiv Khera (b. 1961) has said:

“Research has shown that it takes 31 days of conscious effort to make or break a habit. That means, if one practices something consistently for 31 days, on the 32nd day it does become a habit. Information has been internalised into behavioural change, which is called transformation.”

My own experience is that there isn't any magical line – either at 31 days or at any other point. Rather, habits gradually form and strengthen through repetition – which means the amount of willpower/determination/conscious effort required to sustain the activity slowly gets less and less. Still, even if you don't find on the 32nd day that the behavior has become a settled and permanent habit, you will at least have begun to develop some of the momentum of habit. Thirty-one days happens to be the number of days in December, so let's give it a try this month.

This month, make a change – start doing something you've wanted to make a regular part of your life, or stop doing something you've come to regard as a “bad habit

It doesn't have to be a huge change – sometimes profound transformations start with a modest change of habit.

Pick something to do and do it every day for 31 days. Or pick something that you've been doing more days than not, and refrain from it for 31 days. Choose something reasonable and do-able – something that you realistically can do every day, even if you're traveling and away from home.

Don't set a goal to work up to (like total miles run, pounds lost, or minutes of meditation). This is not about improving your performance at something – it's just about doing it (never mind how well or poorly). The only goal is just to do the new thing every day for 31 days.

This is an exercise in very intentional change. While profound personal transformation is usually only partly intentional, adding (or subtracting) one simple habit teaches us to be more alive to possibilities for much bigger changes.

Your new habit could be a particular spiritual practice. For ideas, see:
<https://www.cucmatters.org/p/spiritual-practice-directory.html>

– or it could be exercise/diet/hygiene related.

Just pick something new and resolve to do it daily for 31 days.

Come to your Connection Circle prepared to talk about how it's going!



Questions

Look over these questions and find **the one** that “hooks” you most. Then let it take you on a ride. Many of the questions refer to articles or quotes in this issue, so consider the perspectives raised by the article as you contemplate the question’s meaning for you. Live with the question for a while. Allow it to regularly break into – and break open – your ordinary thoughts. And then come to your Connection Circle prepared to share that journey with your group.

1. In “Goo,” Meredith refers to “a goo-ish time.” What might be goo-ish about your life right now?
2. How does Marvin Lavanhar’s phrase “a soulful life of integrity and courage” resonate? Does such a life require transformation? Does it require *continual* transformation?
3. Spiritual transformation is about becoming who you are, not becoming what you aren’t. What does this tell you about how to live?
4. Debra Garfinkel points to extravagant love, “wholly given and wholly received,” as the primary transformational force. How so?
5. What do you learn about transformation from Van Gogh’s “Starry Night” and Anne Sexton’s poem about it?
6. “Perfection is constant transformation” (Nia Peebles). If this were true, what would it mean for you?
7. Are you perfect?
8. Does “transformation” point to something more radical than “growth”? If so, what?
9. “The revolution that will save the world is ultimately a personal one” (Marianne Williamson). What is this “personal revolution”?
10. The most profound transformations are not fully intentional – but they are *partly* intentional. The result is not fully envisioned beforehand – but it is *dimly* envisioned. What do you want to become? What do you do to cultivate that becoming?
11. Can lasting personal transformation happen in a flash?
12. “The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change” (Carl Rogers). Why is that?
13. Is there a different question about transformation that’s niggling at you?



For Families

Birch Spick, Faith Formation & Congregational Life Coordinator

This month, we will explore *Transformation*. At its heart, transformation is about change. Change can be scary, or exciting, but it is almost always uncomfortable. Something we can take comfort in however is that change is always happening, even when we don't realize it. You're changing right now as you read this page! Sit with that idea for a while if it sounds trite. How are you changing right now? How have you changed in the last month? The last year? How did those changes make you feel?

The other thing we can take comfort in is that very often, we don't have to encounter change alone. Whether we are changing by growing another year older, or getting messy in the process of learning something new, there are other people in our lives who can support us. The opposite of this is important to remember also: we have the opportunity to show up with love and compassion for the people experiencing change in our lives, however exciting, scary, or uncomfortable that change might be.

This month, we will encounter some of these stories in our Sunday services, and children will explore them more through games and activities in their classroom. Consider exploring these stories and their lessons at home with these questions.

- ["Making the World" by Douglas Wood](#)
 - This is a story about how little changes are always happening and creating the world together.
 - *Who helps make the world around you?*
- ["Introducing Teddy" by Jessica Walton](#)
 - This is a story about a teddy-bear who is changing how she shows up in the world.
 - *How can we support people making changes in their lives?*
- ["Anh's Anger" by Gail Silver](#)
 - This is the story about a child changes his relationship with his angry feelings.
 - *What do you do to calm down when you have big or challenging feelings?*
- ["The Little Yellow Leaf" by Carin Berger](#)
 - This is a story about a little leaf afraid of the unknown.
 - *What can we do when we're afraid of change?*



Check Out

From everything we've shared during this time together, what overall message stands out for you?



Chalice Extinguishing

Words from Carl Rogers: “The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change.”



Connecting is produced by the First Unitarian Church of Des Moines for use in small groups. Each month (ten months a year) explores a different theological or spiritual theme. Next issue: 2024 Jan: Transformation