

July 23, 2017
UU Church of the Desert
Worship Leader: Angelina Carpenter

Opening words

May we come into this space hallowed by years of thoughtful time together. May we come into the company of this congregation, enlightened by reason and moved by concern. May we come with open minds and warm hearts.

May we here cultivate a confidence that human intelligence and human affection can temper and ultimately overcome cruel circumstance and misguided malice, with faith in the power of good over evil.

So may we find both our social responsibilities and our individual salvation.

Unitarian Universalism as Transformative Community

In the words of one of my mentors along this path to ministry... “If you are here today in affliction, may you find comfort. If you are comfortable may you be afflicted.” And in my words - for it is from affliction that we begin to change.

I want to open with a story that was life changing for me...and one you may recall.

In July of 2008, a man stepped into TN Valley UUC in Knoxville, TN, took a shotgun out of a guitar case and opened fire on a room of unarmed men, women and children: Killing two people, wounding 6 others and traumatizing all who were there and emotionally wounding others who care deeply about the church and people who attend there.

It was a hate crime against our liberal, open-minded way of loving and accepting everyone who came through our doors. Five years later, while doing my Supervised Ministry for seminary I was completing a Pastoral Care internship at this same church.

In this role as PC intern-parishioners would approach me sideways with the question - "What does a PC actually do?" Employing my active listening skills of "listening between the lines"- or listening for what is not being said - I saw this as an opportunity to hear what the congregant was seeking. I asked "What is on your mind and heart." Many times it was about the shooting. One young woman, a PhD candidate at UT Knoxville and mother of 3, described how she couldn't quit talking about it now ... another man had not gotten over, how he, a peace-loving man his whole life, became so angry and violent that he kicked the gunman multiple times while he was being held down by other church members. And another women thought she was losing her mind.

With approval from my supervisor, The Rev. Jenny Arthur, I held a group for those still working through the process of adjusting to life following this horrific day in our communal history. To better prepare myself, I attended a program at Eastern Mennonite University titled "Healing Historical Harms." Some of the people described above attended the group, along with others. Gathered together in a circle we shared our stories and we healed. The result was transformative for them, for me, and the whole church.

As a movement, our UUism has always been on the healing* edge of society. All the way back to our roots in Hungary in the 1500s when we were being persecuted by religious fanatics, because, we as Unitarians believed it was ok to think of Jesus as someone to follow, not worship. We also were opposed to the current trending of the development of the theology of the Trinity- b/c, get this, it wasn't Biblically-based. It was the passing of the Edict of Torda, by the only Unitarian king, John Sigmund that allowed our philosophy of religion to begin to take hold. From our beginning, we were on the healing edge of transforming religious tolerance.

Here on this continent, from the Birth of this Nation, we have fought oppression and stood for people on the margins of society. And we continue to be on the forefront right up to Black Lives Matter, the Right to Marry, of today, the Care and Concern for Mother Earth and gearing up for the global issue of the battle for water. Transforming our future. Here in this congregation through your "Values in Action" groups you are bringing change in your community and most likely within yourself.

How does transformation such as this begin? Sometimes it is gentle, other times by force. Always with a little magic that cannot always be explained.

First, to understand the process of transformation, let's look at what Gideon (the grub turned butterfly in the story Gideon's Dream: A Tale of New Beginnings (4)) went through.

In the comfortable warm place of his cocoon, his chrysalis, Gideon begins to digest himself, releasing enzymes to dissolve all of his tissues. If we were to cut open his cocoon at just the right time, caterpillar soup would ooze out. At this stage, the caterpillar is referred to as a pupa. While it might appear really messy, it is not necessarily (kinda like my desk). There is a method to the madness. Within this caterpillar soup, certain highly organized groups of cells known as *imaginal discs* exist. These discs survive the digestive process. They will become the framework for what Gideon will need later as a mature butterfly. They are the discs for his eyes, for his wings, his legs and so on. The process itself is a bit messy, but not without purpose. Personal and community change is much like this. AND just like Gideon it can end in beauty. We can find evidence of this in many religions:

- Buddha became awakened after years of wondering and searching for answers to the suffering of life.
- Judaism's annual ritual of atonement, Yom Kippur, is an introspective reflection on the previous year letting go of mistakes or harms directed at or received from another. This time of forgiving self and others is a piece of transformation.
- In the New Testament^[1], Christians are instructed to be *transformed* by the renewing of your mind.
- In Pagan/Wiccan/nature-based religions, winter rituals are a time of introspection for letting go of old ways that no longer serve us, of forgiving others, of letting go of the past to move toward the future.

And in his book, *Becoming More Fully Human*, humanist author William Murray recognizes that humanism is religious too, because "it binds people together and helps people to re-connect with ultimate reality understood as nature or as life w/o illusion."^[2]

We are transformed in the mere act of coming together. We are transformed in community.

Anyone who has ever sat in on a committee meeting, or been a part of a group working toward a common goal know what I speak of here, right?

In each of these processes transformation is a surrendering-a surrendering of the ego to something larger than ourselves. The process for us humans often begins when a tragedy has occurred: an accident, a loss of a job, an unexpected death, a divorce. [\[1\]](#)

Sometimes it comes as a gentle tug at our heart -- a yearning for something more out of life. A feeling, a questioning: "Is this all there is?" An emerging realization of one's inner life that has gone unnoticed and unattended; a growing recognition of the power dynamics in a relationship; questioning, "Who am I?" "What are humans for?" "Why am I here?" "What am going to do with the rest of my life here on this planet?" all of these are questions pulling us forward.

Whether we come into this transitioning time quietly and gently or through the rage of sudden change - the common factor is that of the challenge. This is when the real work begins.

In teaching about the 3rd Noble Truth of Buddhism, Joseph Goldstein reminds us that after the sudden awakening, gradual cultivation begins. It is in this latter, that we need to be vigilant about NOT returning to the old familiar ways of being. In ontological life coaching we call these our survival mechanisms - our automatic way of being that served us at one time, but no longer does if we want to be growing, evolving people and organizations.

and NOT to make the tool (whatever it was our new object of reverence) -the raft that got us to the other side in the first place.

In this initial time after the awakening, we are exhilarated, discovering new ways of being. Then it starts to become wobbly, uncertain, even unstable. We begin to question our decision. We are no longer sure of who we are since we no longer have that job, or are no longer that spouse, or no longer have the health we once had. There is an emptiness. A darkness. A soupiness. It is place of new beginnings if we can sit with, experience it. And just as it is for the caterpillar, allow it to get murky and messy.

This is where community comes in because transformation does not happen in a vacuum. Leaning into this murkiness is the best way through it. And learning to lean on each other through it is how we survive and thrive. And it is how we change our world.

We live in a time where isolation and disconnection are the norm. Nelson Mandela introduced the world to the South African concept of Ubuntu- “I am; because of you.” or “People are not people w/o other people.” He is quoted as saying, within the collective conscious of South Africa we get to experience the deepest parts of our own humanity through our interactions with others.” This is a concept worth exploring and living into. It is our 7th principle: *The interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.* Within the collective conscious of UUCOD you get to experience the deepest parts of your own humanity.

Transformation begins with a yes! A yes to that gentle pull to a different life. A yes in the spiraling circumstances of a life falling apart. And then a Yes! to keep on cultivating the new you developing every day. By saying Yes! to that dream that keeps calling to you.

To begin wrapping it up I want to share a couple more stories of transformation from our larger UU World.

UU minister, Victoria Safford at White Bear UU Church in Minnesota, illustrates this well in a story she shares, titled in “Hungry for Transformation”^[3]. She tells it so well, I am just going to read it in her own words. It is a story of circling together in February 2002, 6 months after 9/11.

We hoped not to barrel right away into all those noisy Unitarian Universalist opinions, all those articles they're reading in *The Nation* and *The Progressive*, the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, those Web sites that they've found, the commentaries that they've heard on NPR, the positions they're defending so ably on the op-ed page, and of course the persistently wobbly but heartfelt agenda of the under-funded Social Action Committee. We knew we'd get to all that eventually, but we didn't want to go there right away. Instead we hoped to cast a different kind of circle, within which, out of which, people could rise to the holy occasion of hearing one another, of beholding one another — which is related to but different from filling an empty room with intelligent Unitarian talk. It was a gathering for prayer.

Sorrow flowed into the room. Rage, decades old — or new and young and raw, straight out of the awesome youth group — stormed into the circle. Silence made its holy way. And now these were dangerous waters, and as we spoke and heard each

other, inevitably we paddled very close that night to the deadly shores of despondency and cynicism. Then, someone in the circle saved us all from drowning, someone with more presence of mind than the minister could muster in the moment. He said, "You know we cannot do this all at once. But every day offers every one of us little invitations for resistance, and you make your own responses." I wrote it down, right then, because this person is prone neither to social activism of any kind, nor to religious language, of any kind, but it was he who said, "It is a sacred offering, the invitation to resistance, and every day you make your own responses," so humbly, so quietly, but with trembling conviction. And we were grateful and amazed.

Transformation is occurring all the time. People are waking up to higher consciousness faster now than ever. UUism is a perfect place to allow this to unfold. We have always been on the healing edge of Life - with a capital L - because it is the sacred work of moving humanity forward.

Learning to lead with our hearts, in addition to our minds, is what it takes in this day and time.

Back to the story I opened with: When the shooting occurred at Tennessee Valley UU Church 9 years ago, I was not a member. I had been attending to discern if moving from my United Church of Christ church to Unitarian Universalism was the right move for me. I had worked with many members of the church on movements of change in our community and together the two churches had worked together as well, some projects with my leading. Through this leadership, I had become friends with Tennessee Valley's minister, Rev. Chris Buice.

Six months after the shooting, I check in with my friend, Rev. Chris. He is changed. Like never before, he wants to know how am I doing? How is my son? How is school going? I reflect back to him my observation of his change and he nods affirmatively with a tear in his eye and says to me. "When I was standing in the main hall the day after the shooting I felt this sensation come over me." And he is wiggling his fingers like this. I felt this warm sensation and all I can imagine it was is all the prayers and love coming our way from all around the world. I had myself had just had an experience of the mystery entering my soul in an explainable kind of way-so I resonated with what he had to say.

In his Op Ed piece in the US News & World report he spoke of responding to the hate of this crime with love.

Members of my congregation have been hurt. But we have also been healed by the feeling that there is a love greater than our theological differences, a compassion that is not limited by the boundaries of any creed. I firmly believe, now more than ever, that love is stronger than death. Love is more powerful than hate.

And through collective community, our own UUA's Standing on the Side of Love, already in the works, was launched. It was a transformative, mystical experience for him brought on by a terrible tragedy and sustained by leaning into the community of church that is once again changing the world.

On the homepage of the website of our sister congregation, Chalice Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Escondido, are these words from Rev. Sharon Wylie. "Participation in religious community is an act of resistance in a culture that pushes us into disconnection and isolation."

By showing up here today... and all the other days before and after... you are making a radical change. The ripple effects from that one small act are tremendous. AND I WONDER... What waves can you create if you lean in a little more. Open yourself up a bit more to the mystery of it all.

That mystery is in our roots, too. Here in America, the Transcendentalists, such as Thoreau, Emerson, and one we hear less from, Margaret Fuller, influenced the founding of this nation with the ideas of connecting with the Divine by keeping our lives simple and connecting deeply with nature. An undercurrent still prevalent -- gently pushing us forward to becoming more fully human.

These are transformative times. You are feeling it in your bones. Lean into it. Trust yourself. Trust your community here. And see where you, this beautiful group of people providing an oasis in the desert of life, can go.

May it be so.

[1] [Romans 12:2](#)

[2] *Becoming More Fully Human*

[3] <http://archive.uuworld.org/2002/05/encounter.html>

4 [Dychtwald K.](#), [Dychtwald M.](#), [Zaboski G.](#), & [Zaboski, D.](#) (2008). *Gideon's Dream: A Tale of New Beginnings*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.