

## THE ART OF TRANSFORMATION

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As I was writing this sermon on Friday, I had my phone and internet at the ready to hear what was going on in Annapolis, as a marriage equality bill was being hotly contested in the Maryland House of Delegates. I have been serving on the board of the UU Legislative Ministry of Maryland for the past six years and have testified numerous times in front of both the House and the Senate on behalf of marriage equality. During that time, I've watched the nature of the argument change and was hoping that the way was ripe for transformation. And so I was experiencing the close-to-agony of one of the qualities for soulful living, which is the way of transformation: patience.

“I have just three things to teach,” offered Lao Tzu some 2600 years ago, “simplicity, patience, compassion. These three are your greatest treasures.”<sup>1</sup>

I've done advocacy work for LGBT civil rights for some time now in various capacities, starting before entering the ministry in the 1990's. The seed, I believe, that began to grow within came when I witnessed the struggle and death of two close friends to AIDS. They were living, basically, as a married couple, though legally calling it “a marriage” was not something we even discussed.

The first two memorial services I officiated came while I was in Seminary, for those good friends within a couple years. Their families of origin did not plan memorials, for they had been rejected long ago for being who they blessedly were. The friend who died after his mate made me executor of his non-existent estate

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<sup>1</sup> Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu. Stephen Mitchell, translator. Verse 67.

because he feared what his family would do with the resonance of his life after he died. He was right: the family was too ashamed to have a funeral for their gay son in their home town, and inquiries about his belongings were inspired merely by what might bring in some money. The richness of his life was lost on them and that is a sad thing.

The ground had already been prepared for me to see heterosexism and homophobia because several loved ones, family and friends, were gay or lesbian. I am grateful for that grounding, because the most effective way for new knowledge to be integrated into our systems of knowing, is to have it enter into our lives through acquaintances, experiences, education, or the gift of story. We form and reform our way of being through the lives we are living.

I speak of this justice work, or any justice work, today because it is a powerful teacher of transformation. Actually most endeavors are teachers of transformation. A diet is an agonizing teacher of transformation. Parenting, a perplexing teacher of transformation. Art, a humbling teacher of transformation. In short, any endeavor, and any day, can teach transformation because that is the way of things – it is the flow of our lives and cosmos. It is a part of our true nature within the nature of all things.

Which brings us to the greatest challenge of our natural flow: the fear of death or disappearing, because in the flow of transformation, we see that our lives are fluid, not static, and that the more we hold on the less we fully live.

The caterpillar lets its world come to an end as it dissolves into a kind of primordial ooze in the cocoon to then become a butterfly. The acorn must split

wide open to begin to grow into an oak. Our inhale must form into an exhale. Our physical birth creates the fact of our physical death. It's all one. And we are a part of it all.

Deepak Chopra, modern physician and Hindu, often reminds his listeners that in the course of a year 98% of the cells in our body are different. So, for those who feel they are ill equipped to flow with transformation, I submit you are underestimating yourselves...you are being and becoming all the time.

There is something even a little more daunting than our flow of transformation and that is to see change not as an end, but simply another form. For to embrace the art of transformation, we must let go like the caterpillar or open like the acorn and come to a sense of life that knows no death.

I don't know about you, but that's a hard concept to wrap my mind around. For as a mortal being, my relationship with life is that it ends in death. To even come to such a notion and entertain it as a reality, I have to love life enough to let it be larger than I can fathom and longer than I can live. And that takes a lot of trust – trust that in letting go all will be ok. An attitude that some might call “letting go and letting God”.

This does not mean letting go of responsibility. In fact, that is one of the glorious gifts we are given, the ability to respond, the ability to co-create the life we are living. But it does mean letting go of being the center of all things, of fancying ourselves in charge. We have choice, but are not in charge. We have will, but do not rule existence.

The bit of the universe that is us can come into harmony with the Unity of all Being and manifest its wisdom in our lives. This again calls for a great deal of trust in ourselves and in the unknown, trust beyond clinging, trust beyond controlling, trust beyond our need to be special and separate ourselves from others. It is giving ourselves over to on-going creation and finding ourselves participating fully in it. It is practicing the art of transformation.

Duane Elgin, social scientist and author, wrote: “After fourteen billions years of evolution, we stand upon the Earth as agents of self-reflective and creative action on behalf of the universe. We see that we are participants in an unceasing miracle of creation. This recognition brings a new confidence that our potentials are as exalted, magnificent, and mysterious as the living universe that surrounds and sustains us.”<sup>2</sup>

This echoes the wisdom of Ralph Waldo Emerson in the teaching stream of Unitarian Universalism: "Let us learn the revelation of all nature and thought," he wrote some 150 years ago, “that the Highest dwells within us, that...within us is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related.....”<sup>3</sup>

Watching the dialogue and sensibility toward lgbt civil rights over the years, I have been humbled by the “unceasing miracle of creation”. Two things are clearly true; that undaunted affirmation of the dignity of life breaks through the toughest barriers and no one of us is in charge. Justice work is intentional work, but it

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<sup>2</sup> “Our Living Universe” Duane Elgin

<sup>3</sup>Emerson. Nature.

works its way, not because we force it, but because we find it and let it sing in our lives.

When working in White Plains 16 years ago, I met a lesbian couple who asked me to officiate at their ten year celebration of life partnership. We spoke of how it was not a wedding, and I said, in the initial interview, that I would be happy to officiate for them if it ever did become legal. We all thought that was a pipe dream at the time.

By then I had officiated at many weddings. UU ministers are given the opportunity to perform weddings in all sorts of places: gardens, restaurants, museums, beaches...and we marry those who are often rejected by other religions due to mixed faith, history of divorce or location of the wedding.

I knew I was solidly a UU minister when my husband once asked me, as I was getting dressed to officiate, what kind of wedding it was. I answered, without skipping a beat: "heterosexual". The answer surprised me and seemed natural all at once.

Well, as you know, in May of 2004, marriage equality came into being in Massachusetts for gay and lesbian couples. Soon after, I got a phone call from the couple who had moved to Massachusetts a few years before. "It's legal!" they said. And up I went.

Something happened during that wedding that I did not expect. I think it was about 2/3rds of the way through. Standing in front of the wedding couple while listening to a musician serenade the event, an ease of being came over me. I suddenly realized, in a way that I had never realized, that this wedding was *exactly*

*the same as any other.* It caught me off guard, opened my heart and transformed my understanding. I felt a deeper freedom and joy that I didn't know existed: freedom in equanimity, in shared being.

All these years I had been supporting my friends and family as an ally, bestowing good will on the ones that wanted inclusion. All these years I had no idea that I had no idea what true marriage equality was about. Standing in the middle of the church, ready to administer the vows, I was liberated from assumptions and mindsets that kept me from truly knowing that these two women were marrying the same way as any loving consenting adults marry. I wasn't a hero for a cause, I wasn't a healer of division, I wasn't a pioneer...I was simply someone who, through years of advocacy and sincere desire to understand, finally came to a larger truth. I didn't orchestrate this transformation. It was given to me – yes, because I made room – but that was all. The rest came from nature's wisdom, the soul of the whole of Being.

Once I realized that I, a dedicated ally, who had the fortune of years of familiarity, had resistances within me that I couldn't see, my patience grew and my compassion broadened. We must believe in everyone's ability to come to deeper truth, including ourselves. Self-righteousness does not encourage transformation.

Coming into a new way of being and seeing can be understood, a bit, like Elizabeth Kubler Ross's "stage of grief". Grieving accompanies change. Transformation is about something dying while new life emerges. We may have to let go of a perspective, or an established way of being, or a privilege, or a sense of power or control....these things must dissolve or crack open in order for new life to emerge.

And the new life is the old life reformed, reconverged, re-energized. This is true for cultures as well.

German political thinker, Rudolph Bahro, once said: “When an old culture is dying, the new culture is created by those people who are not afraid to be insecure.”<sup>4</sup>

Let’s take the work of marriage equality and the ways we block transformation:

There’s a time of Denial:

“Gays don’t really exist. It’s a choice.”

“We’re not preventing you from marrying, just find a mate of the opposite sex”

“You can pray away the gay.”

Because we are relational beings, this way of regarding others is especially hurtful and damaging. Think of all the times you have felt unheard and unseen. It blocks the simple truth of our interconnectedness. Communities of affirmation are essential, especially when experiencing the violation of dismissal.

Another posture that is taken to obstruct the deeper truth is Anger.

This is the “God hates homosexuals” stage, taking on the illusion of the wrath of God, justifying fear and hatred as a way to keep the world safe and sacred.

This is the slippery slope phase....demonizing the new reality by linking it with unhealthy or unsafe qualities of life: bestiality and promiscuity, sexual abuse and murder.

It’s also the phase when people are shunned, thrown out of families, rejected.

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<sup>4</sup> As quoted in Practicing Peace In Times of War, Pema Chodron, p. 88

This is a dangerously violent stage not only towards gays and lesbians and their children, but also in generating the spiral of suicide.

Another phase of resistance is Bargaining.

At the House hearing one testifier protested that they were being asked to go from tolerance to acceptance. Measures had been taken in the law to allow for equality. Measures had been taken to allow gays and lesbians to exist, she posited, but acceptance is more than she bargained for.

Depression is another stage. This is a powerful stage that makes us feel like a victim of circumstances that we cannot control. In comes sorrow that the world is changing for the worst, that what we thought would be the way things are is not the way things are.

And, if the ground is ripe for transformation, in comes Acceptance. This is often a slow process that takes many years. We still have racism, sexism, many ways that we divide from the unity of all things. Acceptance is a stage that transforms as much as any other. There is no end or perfection, just deepening.

By the way, the House passed the Bill. This week is the Senate hearing, and then, if the readiness is there, the governor will sign marriage equality into Maryland law. Then comes the referendum and challenging, uplifting, daunting, difficult dialogue in the citizenry.

Unitarian Universalist communities, by virtue of the sharing of our lives, build the courage to have faith, to believe in lasting love of life and abundant good will.

Ultimate answers are beyond individual reach and must be discovered in dialogue, experience and, if we're lucky, in-breaking revelation. Congregations model that which is wished in the world: they are laboratories of human potential. It is the place where we can practice peace and pass it on, a place where we can work to find the justice and compassion we want in our lives and gift it to our legacy.

Thank you for all you do and for all the life you affirm. Thank you for this morning together which is now a part of us all. Be artists of transformation. Each of your cells knows how.

Blessings Be. Amen.