

First Unitarian Church of Wilmington  
Rev. Dr. Larry Peers, Minister  
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## **The Gradual Transformation**

*"I remember one morning when I discovered a cocoon in the back of a tree just as a butterfly was making a hole in its case and preparing to come out. I waited a while, but it was too long appearing and I was impatient. I bent over it and breathed on it to warm it. I warmed it as quickly as I could and the miracle began to happen before my eyes, faster than life. The case opened; the butterfly started slowly crawling out, and I shall never forget my horror when I saw how its wings were folded back and crumpled; the wretched butterfly tried with its whole trembling body to unfold them. Bending over it, I tried to help it with my breath, in vain.*

*It needed to be hatched out patiently and the unfolding of the wings should be a gradual process in the sun. Now it was too late. My breath had forced the butterfly to appear all crumpled, before its time. It struggled desperately and, a few seconds later, died in the palm of my hand.*

*That little body is, I do believe, the greatest weight I have on my conscience. For I realize today that it is a mortal sin to violate the great laws of nature. We should not hurry, we should not be impatient, but we should confidently obey the eternal rhythm."*

*a reading from Zorba the Greek by Nikos Kazantzakis*

## **The Gradual Transformation**

If I were to compile my own personal collection of scriptures, I would include this reading by Nikos Kazantzakis, from Zorba the Greek. Like any meaningful scriptural passage that I turn to again and again, always finding some new meaning, it reminds me of so many enduring and essential messages:

*The process of unfolding in nature and in our lives must not be forced. When we rush through life, we may lose so much in its unfolding process.*

- We must come to appreciate those eternal rhythms in nature that require no effort but a willingness to participate with them

- Hurriedness is so prevalent, so easy to imbibe from this culture we live in — whether we realize it or not, and mostly we don't realize it — could bring about more harm than good.

I don't seek to convince you of these truths, although I myself need to be reminded again and again. The story speaks to us each in its own way.

*“We should not hurry, we should not be impatient, but we should confidently obey the eternal rhythm.”*

I said as I began, that I could add this reading to my own compilation of scriptures. Perhaps you have your own set of readings—from official scriptures and/or from the scriptures of your own fashioning.

If not, I hope you will start compiling readings that you could return to again and again. Perhaps your own compilation of intentional ways to cultivate your own soul could become gentle reminders to you; could hold you; could inspire, encourage and challenge you in the living of your days.

Perhaps, if a number of us begin gathering these readings in a three-ring binder, in an electronic file -- or even post-it notes — sometime next spring we could have a service in which we hear some of these readings from one another.

I first got this idea of compiling one's own scriptures in the late 1980s when I attended a training with Ira Progoff, the depth psychologist, whose methods of Intensive Journal and process meditation are so well respected.

Progoff was the son of Russian Jews. He grew up in Brooklyn, served in the Army during World War II, and returned to do his doctorate at the New School for Social Research in New York City.

He was in his early 70s then, and gave a stunning account of the despair in his own life following the devastations and atrocities of the war.

Contemplating some of the horrific events of the war and in particular, he was haunted by the image of the Nazi book burnings, wondering what would have happened to civilization if the world's sacred scriptures and books of wisdom had actually been destroyed.

Progoff came to understand that if these books had been destroyed that actually the “depths out of which these scriptures came could not be destroyed.”

He asserted that the individual depths could continue and give rise, if they must, to new “bibles”, new scriptures that could capture our emerging spiritual insights for ourselves as individuals and for ongoing civilization.

Progoff went on to study many of the world's scriptures. He recognized that the bibles of history did not always speak to the modern human with the same power that they may have to previous generations.

He went on to develop methods, one of which was the Intensive Journal, which brought me to my study with him. This method arose out of his study of creative people and the way certain methods of journaling could allow each person to tap into the depths of their own self and to connect with the gradual unfolding of spiritual and personal insight.

He went on to train those who worked in hospitals, mental health clinics, schools, churches, synagogues, and prisons—and people from all walks of life — to engage more fully with their lives as a whole and with the emerging meaning that comes from this kind of reflective practice.

His approach incorporates a deep appreciation of the underlying process of our lives: not simply to log events but to feel the movement underlying those events. His is what is called “holistic depth psychology” in which we are encouraged to tap into fact and feeling, thought and intuition, image and circumstance in order to participate in our own unfolding of being in a relationship—or, in his words, in dialogue-- with our lives as a whole.

His is not merely a theoretical perspective of the dynamic continuous evolution of the individual and of society, but an engagement with our life in such a way that, in his words, we come to understand that “We are dancers joining the dance of our life as it is going on and continuing it toward its fulfillment.”

I felt led this morning to speak about giving intentional attention to our inner processes of change—since much of our effort in the last several months has been rightly and intensely focused on responding to the threatening forces in our external culture. We focused on concerns that could continue to erode our democracy, perpetuate violence against LGBTQ people, deny women reproductive freedom, ignore the climate emergency, perpetuate racism, make senseless gun violence more prevalent—and on and on.

We will continue to rise up to these external challenges.

We have organized our efforts to vote and to get out the vote. We will organize legislation. We will speak out—and advocate for — all that would benefit the Common Good.

We know all too well that the struggle for a world of justice, a world that works for all, is not done. The struggle continues in our country and, as we have been

reminded recently in our partnership efforts with the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, in several places around the world.

Alongside all of these necessary, essential, and resilient efforts—we also, in my opinion, have to also do the inner work of gradual transformation. Not instead of, but in addition to all of our efforts to change the world, we also have to focus on sustaining our efforts, strengthening our spirits and renewing our resolve about the holiness of life itself

Abraham Joshua Heschel reminds of this essential wisdom that we can often forget in our busyness: “Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy.”

As Gandhi said, “We must be the change we want to see in the world.” That requires inner transformation as well.

As we examine the lives of some of our most admired social activists and social reformers—Gandhi, Mandela, Martin Luther King Junior, Coretta Scott King, Ida B. Wells—we recognize they drew strength from a strong inner self, from a community and from a strong faith as a grounding for their work in the world.

It is no different for any of us who want to make a difference in the world.

Yet, we have to be patient with ourselves in the struggle. We cannot expect immediate results.

The wisdom from the Kazantzakis reading, “We should not hurry, we should not be impatient, but we should confidently obey the eternal rhythm” reminded me of psychologist David Elkind almost twenty-five years ago, drawing attention to the hurrying nature of our culture.

In his book, The Hurried Child David Elkind called our attention to all of the ways, in particular, that we hurry our children through life. He showed that by blurring the boundaries of what is age-appropriate, by expecting — or imposing — too much too soon, we force our kids to grow up too fast, to mimic adult sophistication while they secretly yearn for time to act their age.”

In the two decades plus since this book was published, Elkind proclaims that we have actually “stepped up the assault on childhood—through our hurrying approaches prevalent in schools, the internet, the wider culture, movies, and television and school violence.”

This prompted Elkind to issue a 25-year anniversary edition in which he offers parents and children new advice in counteracting the hurrying tendencies in contemporary culture that impact healthy child and youth development and perhaps rob some of the joy and freedom from childhood.

I can't help but think that we are all — whether or not we are a teacher or a parent — complicit in this hurriedness in our culture these days. We are hurriedly and busily moving through our days.

And, I keep hearing even from some (so-called) retired folks in our congregation how busy they are — and I quote, “Larry, I am busier than I have ever been.” Right?

In fact, I have to admit that I personally could probably write a sequel to Elkind's book entitled, The Hurried Child Who Never Stopped Hurrying.

Why is it that we often seem to have our foot on the accelerator—when we may need to be pumping the brakes a little more along the way?

Could it be that many of us are like that character Zorba, trying to hurry the caterpillar along?

Of course, life has its own way of reminding us to appreciate the wisdom in Zorba's words: “to confidently obey the eternal rhythm.”

Sometimes illness, grief, and losses of many kinds bring us to a pausing place that otherwise would not occur in our hurried lives. But I also believe we can find ways to pause, to savor, to reflect, to make sense of our life — as we are living it.

The psychiatrist and spiritual director, Gerald May, lends some insight, I believe that can assist us in doing the inner work alongside our everyday work in the world.

In his book, Will and Spirit: A Contemplative Psychology, he explores how we are each balancing our own particular combination of *willfulness* (making things happen) and *willingness* (appreciating what is.)

He writes:

“Willingness and willfulness cannot be explained in a few words for they are very subtle qualities, often overlapping and very easily confused with each other. But we can begin by saying that willingness implies a surrendering of one's self-separateness, an entering into, an immersion in the deepest processes of life itself. It is a realization that one already is a part of some ultimate cosmic process.

“In contrast, willfulness is setting oneself apart from the fundamental essence of life in an attempt to master, direct, control, or otherwise manipulate existence. More simply, willingness is saying yes to the mystery of being alive in each moment. Willfulness is saying no, or perhaps more commonly, Yes, but...”

Since, he knows his readers are already asking, he adds:

“It is obvious that we cannot say yes to everything we encounter, many specific things and situations in life are terribly destructive and must be resisted. But willingness and willfulness do not apply to specific things or situations. They reflect instead the underlying attitude one has toward the wonder of life itself. Willingness notices this wonder and bows in some kind of reverence to it. Willfulness forgets it, ignores it, or at its worst, actively destroys it. (p. 5-6, Will and Spirit.)

Because I met Gerald (Jerry) May as well, during my graduate work in clinical psychology, his words do not seem esoteric to me. He embodied them. I knew that he spent his time helping people in mental hospitals and in a prison to restore some balance between willfulness and willingness in their own lives. I know that for him spirituality was just as practical as his psychiatric work.

I know willfulness all too well. I have had a predisposition, mostly, like that wind-up toy that has been wound up too tight and sputters all over the place and at a pace that can seem sporadic. I want to get things done! I want to make things happen!

And, I want it all to happen now.

Could it be that we are all like that character Zorba, trying to hurry the caterpillar along?

I believe that we can learn to practice willingness intentionally: through prayer, meditation, journaling, soul-to-soul conversations with another, deep dialogue, walks in nature, and times in Silence.

It may seem that I am taking a detour right now. Yet, I do want to make some connections between willfulness and willingness and our recent Summit at the congregation. It is still very much on my mind, and this is the first time I have been in the pulpit since that event.

As many of you know, a few weeks ago, 70 or so of us met together over a Friday night and Saturday day to:

- Make sense of where this congregation has been during the lifetimes of those present in the room.
- Get a picture of what this moment in history is calling this congregation toward—in order to “own it, not moan it.”
- Discern what directions you as a congregation are willing to move toward.

There were a number of poignant moments in the room during this “Reimagining and Reclaiming Our Future” Summit.

Of course, it was one of the few times since the pandemic that people gathered for such extended focused conversations to listen and to learn from one another. It was a time when people made connections with one another and even with people they had never yet met.

One of the most poignant moments I remember was standing before the group mind map that captured the collective wisdom of those in the room about the emerging trends, challenges, and opportunities. This large multi-colored graphic wall chart captured the trends that those present felt the congregation needed to respond to as it imagines and shapes its future.

That was both a sobering moment and an exciting one.

It was sobering to realize that the world of the early 1960s and even the early 1990's no longer exists. It was a clear indication to us that we are not in a "Back to the Future" time—but indeed in a time for "Reimagining Our Future". That is both sobering and exciting.

We are challenged to live out these words of a favorite Unitarian hymn based on the poem written by James Russell Lowell:

*New occasions teach new duties,  
Time makes ancient good uncouth  
They must upward still and onward  
Who would keep abreast of truth.*

He concludes the poem with this verse:

*Do not attempt the Future's portal  
With the Past's blood-rusted key.*

Over the next few months we will be gathering in action-planning groups to plot out what Re-claiming our Future and Reclaiming Our Future is about. Members of our congregation have already signed up to propose projects and practical steps to move us toward particular directions over the next five years. Not all at once, but over time.

In my experience, congregations imagine that they can achieve their aspirations all at once. Let's take the time to plot out a five-year journey.

As I have often reminded folks: It is only in the first chapter of Genesis that someone said, "Let there be light" and there was light. Likewise, we do not become our future by just stating it. We have to "become the change we want to see." We have to engage in the gradual process of transformation — individually and collectively.

We gather here with one another because we have a willingness to enter the gradual process of change toward what wants to unfold.

We gather here because we are indeed wounded by the kind of world in which we are often encouraged to live --hurriedly.

We gather here because we do not want to be cut off from the sources that can re-ignite in us a sense of our whole life.

We gather here because Life itself, stops us in our tracks, slows us down as we encounter inevitable grief, loss and a dissolving of our strong exterior.

We gather here so that we can listen to the tender parts of ourselves. And, rather than scrape them off the plate like scraps of Life we would rather not be, we can come to recognize that even these are an essential part of Life itself.

We gather here because of "All that is Our Life"

**Benediction** (adapted from a song by Holly Near, "I Am Willing" )

As I offer this benediction, find a posture of willingness. Maybe it is with open hands--extended or in your lap.

*We are open, and we are willing. For to be hopeless would be so strange It dishonors those who've gone before us. So lift us up in the Light of change.*