

“Born and Reborn Again”

August 28, 2011

Two Rivers Unitarian Universalist

Story – “The Map of the World”

I come to you this morning with a story from the Jewish tradition. It is the story of a man, a well-read, socially and politically engaged young man, who was nonetheless somewhat old-fashioned. Old-fashioned to us, perhaps, because he truly loved to read the newspaper. Not online, mind you. Not on his iPad or his Kindle, but live, crinkly and awkward, in his hands. But though he enjoyed his newspaper and read it cover to cover, this man had a little problem. See, he had a son, a five-year-old son, who was constantly interrupting him as he read. One day, when he was feeling especially exasperated with his son’s interruptions, he had a brilliant idea. He saw a large map of the world one of the pages of the Travel section, and since that section wasn’t one of his favorites, he didn’t mind giving it up, especially if it meant he might get through the rest of his beloved paper.

And so he tore off that page with the map, and then ripped it into small pieces, and gave the pieces to his son. He then said to his son – go and put this whole map back together, and when you have it all done, then and only then can you return. The son happily skipped away, and the man breathed a sigh of relief, believing he had bought himself several hours of uninterrupted reading time. However, lo and behold, fifteen minutes later, in skips his son, with the page entirely reconstructed and taped together. Dad was skeptical, of course, thinking he had just randomly put the pieces together, but upon inspection, that wasn’t the case at all. Nope, his apparently brilliant five-year-old had turned those little pieces into an entirely correct map of the world. With his jaw hanging open, his father looked at him, confused. “How could you put the map together so quickly, and so accurately,” he asked his son.

“Dad,” the little boy replied, “it was easy. On the other side of the map, there was a picture of a person. I just put the person together, and the whole world fell into place.” *Put the person together and the whole world falls into place. And of course, put the world in order and therefore restore the individual person.*

Responsive Reading - “When I Change” adapted from words by Ma Theresa Gustillo

Leader: We are here to spend time away from the usual influences and re-learn Reality.

All: When I change, the world changes

Leader: We are here to learn from each other.

All: When I change, the world changes

Leader: We are here to ponder, to grow, and to ultimately reflect the divine mystery at the heart of the universe.

All: When I change, the world changes

Leader: We are here to be relieved of our selfishness, ambition, and ignorance.

All: When I change, the world changes

Leader: We are here to learn when to share, when to listen, and when to keep silent.

All: When I change, the world changes.

Leader: We are here to deepen self-understanding, strengthen self-discipline, and increase our capacity for love.

All: When I change, the world changes

Leader: We are here to abolish prejudice in order to embrace our diversity and appreciate our differences.

All: When I change, the world changes

Leader: We are here to relinquish privilege, so that all may live.

All: When I change, the world changes

Leader: We are here to witness how our singular lives, when held as one, can become a gateway to great possibilities.

All: When I change, the world changes

Sermon - "Born and Reborn Again," by Gretchen Haley

So it goes that one day, you have an idea. It's a quiet idea at first, but it pulls at you, until you just can't ignore it anymore. It's this idea that who you are now, might not be all you could or should be. That where you are, or who and how you love, that some or all of these might someday, or maybe *right now* – need to change. Not because what any of these things have been are wrong, exactly, but more that there's something else awaiting you and your life, a greater connection to the world, to others, to yourself, a deeper, fuller love.

Or maybe you have an idea about the world. With all its violence and dehumanizing forces, an idea growing in you of how the world might change, might become something – more.

Whether it's for personal or for world transformation, our story from earlier reminds us, these ideas are really, two sides of the same page. Where ever our yearning lives, put the world together, heal the person. Gather the pieces of the person in new and transforming ways, so too the world transforms.

Falling in love in any way, that's an idea. Or, deciding to become a parent, what an idea. The call of a new vocation, or a new home, those too. The call of duty or personal sacrifice for a greater good, these as well, ideas.

These ideas are the seeds of transformation, personal change, world change. It all starts here, in the heart, in hope, in imagination.

The idea is born here, and here, and here and it grows. As it grows, it sometimes comes to include a path to the future, and we can see ourselves already a butterfly, feel our wings, all beautiful and free. Like at least two among us, after years of living one place with one kind of daily routine, we suddenly imagine ourselves in a new city with new friends and following a deeper sense of vocation, and then we follow the dream until suddenly, it's real.

And then sometimes there's nothing there in our imagination more than the uncomfortable and even bitter sense that the skin we're in now is cracking, drying, ready to be shed, and we just have to take the leap of faith into the great unknown. Rosa Parks didn't know what would happen when she sat down that day in December, she just knew, she had to sit, it was time.

Her embodied act of resistance reminds us that imagination is not the only birthplace for transformation. It begins too in the body, with a dis-ease somewhere in the bones, in the blood, in the muscles and sinews, sometimes even manifesting itself in real illness or imbalance. The body carries signs of transformation long before the mind comes to know with concrete words or ideas what may be happening. The heart races unexpectedly for seemingly no reason, or the breath

relaxes where there was previously tension. We hear a joke that used to be funny, and suddenly, our body doesn't laugh but instead carries a heavy sadness, and we wonder, what new thing is being born?

And we find our bodies doing things our minds don't quite understand. We turn off the television a little sooner than usual and lay our weary bodies down to bed. We skip over our usually favorite sections of the New York Times because for once, our tolerance for the new ways humans are finding to disappoint seems to have found its limit. We rise early on a Sunday morning in August and come to gather with others who have sometimes wondered with no small amount of skepticism and fear about this thing called religion, this thing called church, and we find ourselves singing and lighting chalices, and speaking of spirit, of life, of changing the world, and changing ourselves.

We are a funny people, I think. So often resisting with our rational brains the experiences our hearts most crave. So often talking ourselves out of the love that stands so close we could almost eat it up if we would let down our defenses and just inhale deep and long, the love that lives within and beyond us all.

Eckhart Tolle tells the story of the beggar who had been sitting by the side of the road for thirty years. "One day after these 30 years, a stranger walked by. 'Spare some change?' mumbled the beggar. 'I have nothing to give you,' said the stranger. Then he asked: 'What's that you're sitting on?' 'Nothing,' replied the beggar. 'Just an old box. I've been sitting on it for as long as I can remember.' 'Ever look inside?,' asked the stranger. 'No,' said the beggar. 'What's the point, there's nothing in there.' 'Have a look inside,' insisted the stranger. The beggar, reluctantly, managed to pry open the lid. With astonishment, disbelief, and elation, he saw that the box was filled with gold."¹

At various times in our lives, I think we've all been both beggars and strangers. As beggars, we have turned to the world, seeking all kinds of treasures: knowledge, wealth, power, fancy homes and fancy stuff...control, affirmation, acknowledgement. Physician Gerald May – a specialist on addiction – says all humans crave centrally an experience of being wholly and unconditionally loved – this is the treasure we seek. And yet for some reason, he says, we are masters at not experiencing this love but instead finding stand-ins that perpetually frustrate us because they are never enough.²

They aren't the real love we crave. Because the kind of love we crave isn't "out there," it's in here. It's the gold we're sitting on, the gold that holds us up every day, even while we go searching all the globe to be filled up with other things.

Which is why, it's so important that we are also the stranger for each other and for our world, calling each other to see and embrace that treasure that is all around, reflecting back the unconditional love and acceptance that our Universalist good news affirms: You are loved, you are worthy, you are precious – already, and always.

And I think it's important in the story that it *is* a stranger – not a friend, or family member, and not the person themselves – who points the way. It reminds us that when we most need to change – most need to get ourselves out of a 30 year rut, or however long engrained pattern of living we're in – we're going to need help from people who can help us see differently, people who can plant in us new seeds of hope, new seeds of transformation. People who aren't like us, who are strange and different and who,

¹ From *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment* by Eckhart Tolle

² From *Addiction and Grace: Love and Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions* by Gerald Mays.

with love, ask us questions about things that most of the time, we just take for granted. What's that you're sitting on? They say.

So with the seeds of hope planted in our bodies, in our hearts, we gather ourselves, beggars and strangers, and walk with each other in love, on this *ongoing* journey of transformation. We discover the source of our treasure again and again, as the universe is a living organism and truth, we know it just keeps on unfolding. The liberal change of heart, Unitarian ethicist James Luther Adams reminds us, or what he calls the Unitarian process of conversion, happens not once but again and again, renewing and deepening our commitment and our connection to the larger spirit of life.³

On the surface, you might think this would come easily to us. Progressives love to talk about change, after all. At least, we do, when it has to do with something out there, something we can theoretically direct and control....but let's be honest, when it comes to our personal lives, many of us plant ourselves firmly in some comfortable intellectual or emotional place and stick with it, sometimes for lifetimes. And so it's important we return to our opening story, and to our responsive reading – to remind ourselves that whatever vision we may have for change “out there,” it has to start by change, right here, in all this messy-uncontrollable-mess of the human heart.

The Religious Educator at the UU church in Tulsa, Kate Starr, says she once overheard a conversation between two middle aged men. “One was consoling the other over the demise of his second marriage. ‘They’re the ones who change, man,’ the first man lamented. ‘I’m the same dude I was in high school.’” Kate says at that moment, she so “wanted to interrupt and explain the problem. ‘See, man, you say that like it’s a good thing. It’s not. Women actually expect a grown man to be, well, a grown man, not the same dude he was in high school. A 16 year old trapped in a middle-aged body is not so attractive.’”⁴

It's funny, right, but funny because it's so true! Changing ourselves in meaningful ways – *is* a messy-uncontrollable-mess, so uncomfortable and even chaotic, that even the most daring among us are prone to directing our change efforts *externally* rather than have to keep ourselves in the unsettling place personal transformation requires.

A few years ago, I was working as a chaplain at the Denver Women's Prison when I found myself in this kind of uncomfortable place. On Friday nights, we'd gather for worship, which to my eye, centered around a CD player set at the front of the room. A CD player blasting what a Lutheran pastor friend of mine calls, “Jesus-is-my-boyfriend” music. The music would fill the room, and the women would sing along with all their hearts. One song would finish, and then one or many women would shout out the number of a personal favorite, and someone would cue up the CD according to the loudest request.

The women would raise their arms in the air, sway together, singing Jesus, Jesus, and me – I was standing in the back, my arms firmly crossed, hoping to demonstrate to all who might look my way, this was *not* my thing.

More than just uncomfortable, I felt embarrassed for the women, and for all this cheesy superficial theology they had somehow embraced. And from this distanced and defended place, I watched. Some

³ From “The Changing Reputation of Human Nature, Part 2” by James Luther Adams, accessible online at http://img.uua.org/mfc/JLAdams_Reputation_Human_Nature.pdf.

⁴ From All Souls' Tulsa “Simple Gifts” journal, “Transformation,” which can be found here: http://www.themebasedministry.org/Files/Journals/April_2009_Transformation.pdf.

weeks went by, and I started to get to know the women. I heard their stories – of greater loss than I could even fathom, more struggle than you’d think a single person could survive.

Then, Friday night would come again, and they’d sing. And they’d cry, and laugh together, and release from their bodies just a little of the stories I knew lived there.

And then, one Friday night, it happened. I was standing there, this song was playing, “Change my heart O God. Make it ever true. Change my heart O God, may I be like you.” And suddenly it just hit me – I mean it hit me who should *really* be embarrassed in the room – and in case it’s not clear, it sure wasn’t the women singing and swaying. I realized, the words didn’t matter.

The theology – Jesus-as-my-boyfriend and humanized Father-God centered as it was – didn’t matter. Because the room was filled with life, and there was just one person in the room who had failed to experience that life, embodied there in the fellowship of women singing together about the possibility of healing and goodness and forgiveness and transformation.

And so, I started singing. “Change my heart O God.” I stepped in closer, and I started singing louder. “Make it ever true.”

OK yes, I was still totally uncomfortable, but I was leaning into my discomfort, learning from it, letting it just be. Paying attention to it, wondering about it. Actually, it wasn’t just uncomfortable, it was terrifying. To let down my defenses like that, to invite these words into my mouth without clarifying what I did or did not really believe, to sing with full voice about Jesus, and how I believe in him and his love for me, how it saves me.

It was terrifying to give into the experience, knowing I too had experienced pain, and shame, beyond what I was willing or able to name. It was terrifying to just be present, in the midst of all that discomfort, in the midst of all that joy, in the midst of all that love.

I was changed that day. After that day, I know, I could receive more people, more fully, be with more people more fully, love the world more fully. And isn’t that what Unitarian Universalism is about, afterall? Loving the world more fully, being with people more fully? And so sometimes, I call this the best Unitarian Universalist worship service I’ve ever been to.

I still sing it sometimes, like this: “Change my heart O Love. Make it ever true. Change my heart O Love. May I be like you.”

The truth is, there is no personal or societal transformation without discomfort. In fact, discomfort and even chaos is a sign that transformation is possible. And the trick is to stay in the discomfort long enough for the deeper change called transformation to come.

We don’t usually. We solve the problem. We fix the pain, get ourselves out of the messy-uncontrollable-mess. But it turns out, feeling unsettled is a *good* thing when it comes to seeking a life of greater meaning, of greater purpose. It’s a *good* thing for us as individuals, it’s a *good* thing for us as a religious community, and it’s a *good* thing as a society.

So in the coming weeks, or months – ok, maybe just start with the next few hours – when that feeling hits you, deep down, that really uncomfortable feeling where you want to cross your arms and show

how this, whatever “this is” isn’t for you - maybe instead, lean into it, and with wonder and light, begin to imagine what hidden wholeness might be calling you, calling all of us forth.

Because I want you to know, it’s serious work we’re up to around here, and if we follow it through, the stakes couldn’t be greater. It’s dangerous business, this building of a new world, this imagining of new hearts. And what’s more, we have no easy answers, no static doctrine to rely on, no single moment of being dunked in water that can assure you your work is done.

This Unitarian Universalist religious path, this TRUU path, it’s a life living on the edge, a life of jagged rocks and dangerous cliffs, of coming up to the flame and asking what it might mean to be wholly turned into fire.

But here’s some good news. Look around - you are not on this dangerous path alone. The beggars and strangers that fill this room today, and the strangers who will join us in the weeks to come, these are also your fellow journeyors. Together, we hold each other in these places of discomfort, we reflect the love we believe is present and holding us all. We remind each other our community is meant not for perfection but for learning, not for a single destination but for ongoing transformation. The water communion we practiced together earlier can be a sign for us all of our shared path, walking together on this worthy journey. We love each other into being, forgive each other into being, imagining together a creation born and reborn again.

May it be so, and amen.