



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Transformed by this World,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on April 12, 2015

Let the promise of your transformation beckon
still that we might finally take the first
tentative step into this new day, yes
let it be so.¹

Last Sunday I talked about Easter’s invitation to tell our own resurrection stories; the ways we have found new life, where it had seemed there was nothing but death. I’m convinced we need to be reminded of this truth, that new life does come out of death, that something new is possible, that there is, as we sang, a “Life that maketh all things new,” and this larger life is not only possible, it’s what we are made for.

This can take time, of course. Good thing that Easter is a season, and not just a day. The same way spring is a season that gradually unfolds, not just one day in March when the days are finally longer than then nights. Our worship theme this month is transformation. And isn’t that what this season of unfolding and becoming and blooming is all about?

Transformation is a caterpillar, after wrapping itself in a shroud of seeming death, breaking out as a butterfly; it’s a newborn child, tiny and helpless at birth, becoming over that first year a little person, moving more and more quickly and capably into the world. Whether the parents want that, or not!

Sometimes we think of change and transformation as threatening, because we are afraid of what could happen, of what we might lose, but isn’t this really how we are supposed to live—open and expectant? And what’s the alternative—to act as if you can stop time and prevent change? The German poet Goethe put it this way:

whoever has not experienced this
to die and so to grow
is but a troubled visitor
on a lonely planet.²

¹ These words are part of the reading, “Psalm 72: Transformation,” by Rabbi Brant Rosen, available online at <http://ynefesh.com/2013/12/31/psalm-72-transformation/>

² Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “The Holy Longing,” translation by Robert Bly

You don't want that. And think of what about you might gain, the potential gifts that transformation brings.

In words at the top of today's order of service, from Paul's letter to the Romans, he says: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). At first glance it sounds like Paul is setting up a divide between the world and God. But is that right?

Paul use the Greek word for the world that also means 'age.' "Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed..." By "world" he doesn't mean this earth that we inhabit, but rather, the transitory things of that age—fashions, attitudes, popular culture, current concerns. Paul is saying, "Don't get stuck in what society tells you to do, don't try to fit in to the expectations of these times, any more than you would try to fit into the expectations of another age. Don't be conformed to these times, but be transformed—be open to being changed, to having your mind renewed, so you may be open to the depths—to the beauty and the possibility that's all around."

My question for you this day, and this season, is this: can you see the reasons for hope and joy, the invitation to be transformed, in the burgeoning life that's all around us? Too often we accommodate ourselves to our surroundings, we are conformed to these things, when we are meant to be transformed and renewed. It's time to peel away any protective layers you may have put on over the winter and let the sun warm your face and open your heart to the hope this season brings.

There's a story of a man who goes to see a therapist because he's depressed. The therapist wants to hear about the man's life. And he says, "Well, because I'm depressed I have a hard time getting up in the morning. I've stopped setting my alarm. When I do finally get up, I have no where to go, so I stay in my pajamas most of the day. I turn on the TV, and watch shows about people whose lives are as miserable as mine. And at night, I have trouble going to sleep."

And the therapist says, "If I did that, I'd be depressed too! Here's what you need to do—set your alarm tomorrow, get out of bed, get dressed. Have a cup of coffee and a good breakfast. Get out—go volunteer at a church or library or shelter. Get out under the sky and in the fresh air. Don't even turn on the TV! Do this for a month and then see if you're still depressed."

In no way do I mean to dismiss the importance, if you are depressed, of seeking professional help. I meet plenty of people who are struggling, who find themselves in times of discouragement and pain. This is part of life. But I also get to see that these times don't last forever—that the dawn does come, that new life does appear, that resurrection happens. What I know is that people who are struggling need companions who don't try to fix them or prematurely take their pain away, but rather, encourage health and healing, help them to pass courageously through the struggle, and make of it, as Durkheim said, "a raft that leads to the far shore."³

³ Karlfried Gras von Durkheim, "The Way of Transformation": The man who, being really on the Way, falls upon hard times in the world will not, as a consequence, turn to that friend who offers him refuge and comfort and encourages his old self to survive. Rather, he will seek out someone who will faithfully and inexorably help him to risk himself, so that he may endure the suffering and pass courageously through it, thus making of it a "raft that leads to the far shore."

I don't know about you, but right now I need that invitation to lean toward joy, the way that the seedlings in a windowsill lean toward the light. I want and need to seek after transformation; to peel off the layers of protection I put on for winter and emerge new, ready to be blessed by the light and spirit of spring. It's time to practice resurrection!

So where do we look for models of this? Last week we heard the Easter story of the empty tomb. This week I offer you the stuff of this world, and of your lives, as our texts of transformation. Consider the seasons of the year: the abundance of summer, the fading light of fall, the dark and quiet of winter, the return of life in spring. Geese flying south as days grow colder and shorter, and heading back when spring comes, goldfinches at the feeder now gradually getting back their bright color, the wetland chorus of peepers, starting up again—these remind us that transformation does happen. What about us, in our lives? What about you?

Isak Dinesen, who wrote the book *Out of Africa* about her life in Kenya, described her love for that place this way: “Up in this high air you breathed easily, drawing in a vital assurance and lightness of heart. In the highlands you woke up in the morning and thought: Here I am, where I ought to be.” What if each morning, you woke and said, “Here I am, come back from the dead! Here I am, so glad to be alive! Here I am, where I ought to be!”

Cheryl Strayed wrote a book, recently made into a movie, called *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*. As a young woman, her life was a mess. Her mom died of cancer when Cheryl was 22, and things went from bad to worse—drug and alcohol abuse, sex with strangers—until one day Cheryl saw a guide book about the Pacific Crest Trail, a hiking trail that goes through California, Oregon and Washington, all the way from the Mexican to the Canadian border. Something in Cheryl said, “I need to do that,” even though she wasn't a hiker and knew nothing about it. She hiked that trail alone, and her book is a funny and sad and poignant story of that transformative journey, which in the end saved her life.

Out there she discovered a new way to see and understand and come to terms with her life; with the losses and all her mistakes. She wrote, “Perhaps being amidst the undesecrated beauty of the wilderness meant that I too could be undesecrated, regardless of what I'd lost or what had been taken from me, regardless of the regrettable things I'd done to others or myself or the regrettable things that had been done to me. Of all the things I'd been skeptical about, I didn't feel skeptical about this: the wilderness had a clarity that included me.”

Out there she found what saved her. It was the wild places of this world. She wrote that her journey “had nothing to do with gear or footwear or the backpacking fads or philosophies of any particular era or even with getting from point A to point B. It had to do with how it felt to be in the wild. With what it was like to walk for miles with no reason other than to witness the accumulation of trees and meadows, mountains and deserts, streams and rocks, rivers and grasses, sunrises and sunsets. The experience was powerful and fundamental. It seemed to me that it had always felt like this to be a human in the wild, and as long as the wild existed it would always feel this way.”⁴

⁴ Cheryl Strayed, *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*.

Sometimes we forget what a privilege it is to be alive, to breathe this air, to receive the gift of this day. This day, which we have been given. My prayer for each of us in this season is that we will wake up to this wonder and this holy mystery; that we will not be conformed to the expectations of this age, but will be transformed by the blessings of this world—this good earth that nourishes and sustains us, that speaks to us, if we will only listen. That says, “You belong here. You are good enough already.” So let yourself be happy and whole. Do this for yourself, ok? But not just for yourself. Because this world, and the people in it, need you. Need every bit of courage, hope and love you can give. This day and every day. Let’s start with this one.

Amen.