

Transformation is part and parcel of most religious groups. The work of a faith community is to build a better world and to help each other become better people, to be open to ... grace ... in our lives.

But it is right around here that I start to stumble a bit. I am a big fan of grace. I talk about grace a lot. I don't insist that we all see it as "the grace of God," but I do call us to see grace as a power that can bring out the best in us and help us through the hard times. That's not the part that makes me stumble. What gives me pause is when the full meaning of that word transformation finally catches up with me.

Let me give you an example. During one of my first years with my congregation I was struggling to imagine what to say on a Stewardship Sunday. I'd figured out I couldn't just talk about money—I knew that much already. So I was looking for an angle to speak about how important the congregation is to its people. I wanted to hear about what this place means. So I started asking for stories of transformation: "How has this congregation transformed you?" And you know what? That question really didn't get us anywhere.

I found person after person saying, "I don't know that I've been transformed here, I don't think that's the right word." People would talk about how the community helped them live out their values, encouraged them to be better people, gave them support in justice issues they cared about or just support to get through another week in their hectic lives. One person finally hit the nail on the head for me when she pulled me aside and said, "No I don't feel transformed by this congregation. What I feel is accepted, and that makes all the difference."

And I knew that. But I get hooked by the shiny side of transformation. I get caught by the thought that our community can build a better world, that it does change lives and truly makes a difference for people. But all of that can happen without it needing to be transformation. I know that. Because when I sit back and really think about it, transformation is major stuff. It's about a complete overhaul.

Transformation is akin to conversion and revolution, not just losing 10 pounds and getting involved at the Islamic Center. It is not about steps toward self-improvement with plans to be more patient or more generous or more involved. Transformation is the whole deal, total metamorphosis: caterpillar to butterfly, man to beast, solid to liquid. When you are transformed you are a whole new person. That's not something to step into lightly. I know all that.

But here's the thing: I pretty much like the folks of my congregation, and the folks of our larger UU circle—just as they are.

I like who you are, and how you look. I like who you love; I like how you care about justice; I like the way you respond to the movement of the spirit when we gather. I like that you have a theology that is your own; I like that you have your unique spiritual practices. I like your quirks and foibles and occasionally challenging mannerisms. You

are wonderful and interesting people and dear to me just the way you are. If we were to each go through a transformation today I'm not so sure I would like the result.

My theology calls me to meet you where you are; it calls me to promote you being who you are without the need to become something or someone else. Sure, I want to be a better person—we all want to be better people. But transformed? Blasted off the horse and left blind for days, turned into a whole new person? Really transformed? I don't think that is something to be wished for.

This isn't just a matter of semantics. There is a deep theology at the ground of this question. Either we accept you as you are or we are in the business of helping transform you into something else. We can't play both sides with integrity.

Unitarian Universalism has a rather clear answer to that, and it's not the old-school Calvinist doctrine of human depravity and original sin. We affirm every person's inherent dignity, inherent worth—which is already there. The church doesn't need to cleanse you or bless you or give you something to make you whole. It is inherent. You do not need to become something more or better to be welcomed here.

As Mary Oliver says in her poem "Wild Geese," "You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting." As Dick Gilbert says in our hymnal (reading #442): "Whoever you are, whatever you are, wherever you are on your journey, we bid you welcome."

Our theology says you need not be transformed first. Come as you are and be blessed. Two of my favorite stories about our 19th century forebear Hosea Ballou make this point through his Universalist theology. The first is something of a parable. He responded with this image when someone questioned his Universalist beliefs:

Your child has fallen into the mire, and her body and her garments are defiled. You cleanse her, and array her in clean robes. The query is: Do you love your child because you have washed her? Or did you wash her because you love her?

And another story comes as he was visiting a member of the town and saw her sweeping the kitchen floor. He asked: Did you require someone to sweep the floor clean before you would sweep it, good woman? You can imagine her response: What a ridiculous question, of course not. Ballou's point was: So it is with God. You need not have already been cleansed before God will accept you and make you clean.

Our theology says you need not be transformed first. Come as you are and be blessed. Yet it must be some foible of my own that keeps me looking to that shiny idea of transformation. I am drawn to stories of how people have overcome despair and struggle to come out the other side. But when I relax I can see the truth of it. We are a place of acceptance, and that in itself is powerful and rare and allows us to be an amazing community of grace in our own unique and authentic style.

Being accepted is major stuff. And as Carl Rogers says:, “It wasn’t until I accepted myself just as I was in this moment, that I was free to change.” A pre-condition to true transformation, then, is to accept ourselves in the moment.

So maybe one way Unitarian Universalism can find an authentic way into the idea of transformation is to start with acceptance. Maybe we can hear the call for transformation not as a hint that we are somehow not good enough as we are, that we are flawed and unacceptable as we begin.

Maybe, instead, we can hear it the way a Zen Buddhist master once put it: “You are perfect just the way you are...and you could use some improvement.” You are acceptable, even perfect. You are who you are and it is beautiful. But don’t stop! Keep growing, keep improving, keep getting better.

Maybe the call to transformation is a call to continue to grow, not because who you are now is not good enough, but rather because who you yet can be is still more amazing! It is not static. Nothing is. Change is a constant, and what is transformation but the most extreme form of change? But change in itself is not good or bad; it just is.

Consider the song we sing from our hymnal (#188) with words by Rumi:

Come, come, whoever you are, wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving.  
Ours is no caravan of despair. Come, yet again, come.

It doesn’t say:

Welcome to the place where we sit down at the end. It says: Welcome to  
the journey, welcome into the caravan. Let’s move.

Perhaps our work in Unitarian Universalism is not to help anyone transform, but to get us through a transformation should one arrive. Our call may be to help build up community support and strength of spirit to sustain us through a transformation should we find ourselves in one.

Our work here is acceptance first. And in accepting, may we provide the resources for each of us to also be more accepting of each other, and of the unfolding of life. As we create this community of support and acceptance, may we also build the capacity for each of us to weather our storms, and be transformed.