

## Transforming Ourselves, Transforming the World

Readings: 'Healing Crisis' by Beth Bullmer  
'Choose to Bless the World' by Rebecca Parker

'Why church?' do people ever ask you this question? Or its variations, like 'why do you go to church?' 'Why do you give your time and your money and your care to this community?' 'Why do you spend your time here, when there are so many other things you could be doing?'

I am asked this regularly. A lot of the people I know are not part of religious communities, so as we get to know one another, I am asked 'why church?' 'Why are you a minister?' 'Why do you devote your professional life to this institution when there are so many things worthy of time and care?' Perhaps these questions or variations of them are asked of you too. To me, these questions are curious, not hostile. I suspect my questioners see religious community as an anachronism, something that was needed in the past but isn't necessary now in our modern world, as if we are a guild of blacksmiths or falconers.

Through my many attempts to answer these questions, the best answer I have come to is that religious community helps us to transform ourselves and transform the world. This is not to say there aren't other ways to pursue transformation, just that religious community is the best way to do this that I have found so far. After this answer, I usually stop talking. There's usually a bit of silence and the conversation shifts to another topic. Transformation is a lot to delve into at a party or a playground. You all get the extended version of the answer today, full of delving. I hope you share with me your reasons for your involvement with religious community, especially if they are different than mine.

Why transform ourselves? Those of us who spend time in self-reflection know we could be better. This doesn't mean we are bad as we are, just not as good as we hope to be. We all fall short of our highest aspirations. That is an inescapable part of being human. We might want to be kinder or more generous or more loving or more hopeful than we are. Some of us might be in the process of healing – healing from trauma, healing from abuse, healing our bodies and our minds after hardship. We might be transitioning into a new role or life stage, not yet sure of how to live our values now. We might be newly retired, newly adult, new in a relationship, new in a job or volunteer position, new in town, our physical or mental abilities might be shifting. How do we live with integrity now? We know there is always a gap between our values and our lives. Transformation is the work of closing that gap – while knowing it will never be fully closed. We will never live our values every moment of every day, but we can practice new ways of being so we are better living our values more of the time.

Why transform the world? I probably don't have to tell you that the world needs transformation, that the Unitarian Universalist principle of a world community with peace, liberty and justice for all is not the world we live in. We do not yet live in a world where everyone would have housing and people are respected when they speak about sexual assault, just to take the unfolding local and national stories that I have followed most closely this week. These are all complicated issues and will require a massive shift in values and resources to solve – and we, as a group rooted in values of love and justice can be part of this societal transformation.

The thing I am learning about transforming ourselves and transforming the world is that they are closely related to each other. As we do the internal work, it changes our actions and impact the world around

us. As we work in the world and take time to reflect on it, we shift internally. Our impact ripples back and forth, from our hearts and souls and minds to the wider world and back again.

How do we transform ourselves? There are ways to practice transformation alone and ways to practice in community. The work alone often takes the form of a spiritual practice, which I commend everyone. If you do not have one yet, I suggest taking time for stillness every day. I take ten minutes a day for silence, to quiet the swirling need that surrounds me and look inward, center myself. I know there are many of you who have robust spiritual practices already. Perhaps you have found that you are able to be closer to the person you aspire to be because you have that practice. For the rest of you, I lovingly suggest some homework. Find a few minutes every day for stillness. Find a comfortable position for your body. Pay attention to your breathing and your body. Set a timer if you need to, so you don't look at the clock. Set aside the to do lists or other whirring thoughts and just be. See what emerges, what thoughts come when you set the rest down. Try to do this most days for a month. See what happens. Let me know if it makes a difference for you.

Community is also a powerful part of transforming ourselves. We need another to speak truth, model the life of integrity, and be vulnerable.

There's a book that captures this idea better than I can. It's called *Emergent Strategy* by adrienne maree brown. I read it this summer during my study leave. Brown is an activist, facilitator, and doula based in Detroit. Her book met me in the despair and overwhelm I was feeling at the state of the world and showed me the beginning of a new way forward. The book is a lot of different things – strategies on social change, reflections on justice movements, interviews, tools for facilitating good meetings. In her book, brown writes about what she calls, 'coevolution through friendship' the relationships we have that help us practice transformation. She writes,

'some elements of coevolution through friendship [are:]

Self-transformation.

...All people in the relationship and community are committed to their own self-transformation. We see ourselves as microcosms of the world, and work to shift oppressive patterns in our bodies, hearts, minds, speech, interactions, liberating ourselves into purpose, liberating our communities into new practices. We each set the pace of our own transformation.

Curiosity.

We have curiosity about our own lives as learning labs for our values and figuring out what it means to be human at this moment in time. And we have curiosity about each other's lives, about why we do what we do, about the roots of our behaviors. We want to know if there are lessons and changes available in the reflection and action cycle of life. This curiosity ranges from philosophical to academic, historical, nosy, somatic. Our lives are our life's work. What matters is that we are authentic with the questions, that we believe the answers are important, and we listen to each other accordingly.

Vulnerable reflection.

We reach out to each other and say things like "something incredible is happening," "I don't know," "I [messed] up," "I think I hurt someone," "I'm overwhelmed," "I'm terrified," "I think I'm hurting," "I'm lost," "Am I falling in [or] out of love?" "[something] happened, what should I do?," "I want to do something new, different, marvelous, [or] dangerous that feels essential to my soul—help!," and so on. We ask others to be mirrors for us at our most vulnerable places, so we can see what we are learning, see new possibilities in our lives...

Present and intentional.

This is perhaps the biggest place to practice. Life is not happening to us. We are learning to be in the actual current moment, to recognize where we have choice... So the great question is: how to be intentional, in the present moment, to take responsibility for your state of being, and for your life?' She continues with cautions, 'There is a lot to be careful of. We are not yet masterful, even though there are moments of collective genius. Sometimes we misread each other, push each other too hard, get defensive, or give unsolicited coevolution pressure.

Sometimes what is happening in the world is so terrifying and urgent that we forget our complexity, or wonder why we would spend time on ourselves or take time for our friendships when there is so much external work to do. What I am noticing is that it is not a privilege to practice coevolution through friendship—it is the deepest work.'<sup>1</sup>

Brown calls this 'coevolution through friendship.' I propose 'coevolution through community.' Each of us needs communities where we can learn what is real, where we can ponder the depths of the soul where the truth is revealed, where we can share what is most important and have it be heard, held, respected, and sometimes lovingly challenged. While pieces of that can happen when we are all together in our Sunday services, small groups do this work best. I hope you have these relationships in your life, whether in the church or elsewhere. If you don't, I want to lovingly suggest you find this sort of small group in your life. This could mean asking a few friends to meet regularly for intentional conversation. This could mean joining a chalice circle or another small group here at the church. I am also offering a class starting next month that I hope will be one of these spaces for those who join it. It's an adult religious education call called the shared pulpit. It will focus on the practice of theological reflection, of passing life through the fire of thought, and refining a message that you can preach to the congregation, if you so choose. Hearing one another's powerful stories and words of wisdom, whatever the context, is important. Hearing about other people's choices and struggles to live out our highest values reminds us that we are not alone in the hard, slow work of transformation. Working toward transformation together gives us partners and confidants as we work to close the gap between our aspirations and our lives.

And as we do the slow work of transformation, it impacts our relationships, our workplaces, our volunteer organizations, our families. One person living with integrity ripples out spreading kindness, love, integrity to others.

As we figure out new ways to be, as we live lives more closely aligned with our values, we can't help but see the parts of our world where people's worth is not respected, where the interconnected web of all existence is not respected, where there is not kindness and compassion in human relations. So we act. We do this both in our relationships and on a broader scale, as we seek to build the Beloved Community.

In recent months, I have been spending a lot of my time reflecting on what our church might be called to do in these times. I wish I could stand here and tell you the one thing we could do as a church that would fix it all. That doesn't exist. There are some habits, though, that I think will help us better transform the world. When we act, we need to be rooted in our values, our relationships, and our strengths. I believe this is why the potluck on Tuesday night worked so well. We built on our relationships, our values, and our strengths. Some of our social justice leaders had been visiting the Bronson Park encampment and knew that food was something the people there needed – and knew how to coordinate with the people there. I have a relationship with the clergy at First Congregational, so they trusted us to use their tables. You all know what it takes to make a good potluck, delicious potlucks are one of the strengths of this church, – and you showed up to do that. We focused on building relationships – we weren't just

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<sup>1</sup> *Emergent Strategy* by adrienne maree brown (Hoopla location, 107-8/160)

dropping off food for 'those people' to eat, but sharing a meal together, talking to one another, remembering that we are all worthy of respect. We created a beautiful hour – with People's people and people experiencing homelessness, Congregationalists, Methodists, community members and others eating their fill. It was a glimpse of the Beloved Community. Of course, we know this event wasn't the long-term solution to homelessness in our community. Of course, we know that some of the people we dined with that night were arrested the next morning when the police cleared the park. Of course we know that long-term solutions will take conversation and more relationship-building and money and other resources. We will turn to ISAAC and other partners as we figure out our best way forward.

And, those of us who were there, will also turn inward to reflect on what we learned and experienced that day. How might the events of that evening – or any other time we try to do good work in the world – call us into a new way of being?

One of the lessons from that night that I've been reflecting, a lesson that I am getting a chance to learn over and over again in my life right now, is that I do not get to control how things turn out. I can only act with integrity and thoughtfulness. I learned late on Monday evening that the city manager had said that the ordinance against camping in the park would be enforced beginning at 7pm Tuesday. Our potluck was scheduled for 6pm. I spent a restless night worrying about what might happen at our potluck. I know others did too. In the morning, I walked the perimeter of the park, praying for courage, trying to feel calm in that space where I might not feel calm hours later. Later, I met with leaders of the event. We thought about adjusting things, but realized that trying to communicate that would probably just lead to confusion. We spoke about how we don't know what will happen but we can show up with our hearts committed to love and justice... and so we did.

We never get to control outcomes, but we can always try to act in accordance with our values – and then, whatever happens, return to our spiritual practices, our small groups working on 'coevolution,' and our church community to reflect, learn, adjust, and then try to live our values again. And this cycles and ripples and as we inspire one another to continue to work to close the gap between our values and our lives and the world and the world we dream about.

So may we be the people of love, the people of love, the people of hope.  
May we plant and tend seeds of hope in our lives and in our world.  
May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.