

A Season of Transformation

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There is so much I'd like to tell you about Theodore Parker.

The sermon from which Mary read was written in the 1840s. It was almost 12,000 words long, and probably took somewhere between an hour and a half to two full hours to deliver. I cannot imagine how long it took to write, in long-hand script, with a goose feather quill, on parchment. It was about the typical length and depth of a sermon in those years. Church was a much more somber and lengthy business than what we experience today.

In order to minimize wear and tear of ministers in that era, it was common for a minister to write one sermon each month. They would preach that sermon at home, and then spend the next three or four Sundays preaching it again and again at nearby congregations. That way, each church got the "benefit" of a brand new two hour sermon each week, but the minister was only required to produce one each month.

Except that Parker made so many people uncomfortable with the things he said that the other ministers in the towns around him refused to share a pulpit with him. When he came to their churches, his "anti-slavery, no really I mean it, and you are to blame, you wealthy owners of merchant ships," did not sit well with the elders in those churches, and so he was not invited back.

Theodore Parker, then, had to come up with 52 new sermons each year, each in the neighborhood of 10-12 thousand words, each related to some

bit of scripture, and each designed to inspire and move the hearts of the people in his pews. The isolation did not force him to conform, though. In fact, it stiffened his resolve and his theology became more and MORE radical through his years of ministry.

Theodore Parker understood that times and fashion and tastes and understandings of things changed over the years, but the universal truth of God's love was everlasting. That message of love and redemption was constant and available to all, always. He understood that reason must be applied to our understanding of theology, which is why he was a Unitarian as opposed to a Trinitarian, but he also understood that there was room for constant revelation, for constant transformation.

Things of this world change all the time. Things of God's world, in his language *in Christianity*, remained permanent.

God's love remains permanent.

For a man of his age, it is remarkable that he was able to take such a long view of how the daily trappings of Christianity had changed over the years, and understood that they would continue to change. So many of his time thought that human achievement had reached its peak with their own appearance, and that further change was at best unnecessary, and at worst, dangerous.

Thus it is in every movement that strives for moral progress and justice. Each generation marches forward and plants a flag in the earth, proclaiming 'Look what we have achieved!' And minutes later the next generation waves on its way by, going further still. When the third and

fourth generations emerge, that first group has become the old guard, distrustful of all this newfangled change the kids are talking about.

December offers us an annual season of transformation. I love December. I wish it was warmer, but still. Every faith tradition in the northern hemisphere has some kind of midwinter ritual that celebrates the image of a light shining into the darkest night. Judaism celebrates the miracle of lights, when the temple oil lasted for eight nights when there was only enough for a few. Ancient pagans observed yule, by decorating a tree with candles and celebrating the return of the sun after weeks of shortening days and lengthening nights. Christians revisit the story of an infant messiah born in the darkest of times during the reign of Herod.

December is a time for transforming dark into light, and shifting despair into hope.

The process of life is transformative. There is nothing about us which is stagnant, or in stasis.

We are all continuously emerging creations of life. Our bodies move along, doing their thing, changing as we need them to, at least some of the time. They cool off when it gets too warm, and generate heat when the air gets too cold. They process nutrition in ways that sustain the many and varied functions of a carbon-based, mammalian hominid life form. That's all pretty amazing stuff.

At the micro level, humans are amazing creatures: always adjusting and shifting and growing and learning and surviving. Always transforming.

When we consider things on a more macro level, things can get a little squicky.

When we exist in community, we slow down to accommodate others. We take into consideration the needs of other members of our cohort. We are less likely to take risks because they might cause harm to others. We are willing to make mistakes when we are the only ones likely to be hurt, but much less likely if others depend on us for safety.

It is as if fears are shared in groups, but not courage.

Reinhold Niebuhr wrote about this, of course, in his book *Moral Man in Immoral Society*. A group of people is less likely to do a brave thing than it is to avoid the whole conflict altogether. In fact, a group of people is more likely than an individual to permit a bad thing to happen without protest or attempt to stop it.

To me, this translates to the African proverb: to go fast, go alone. To go far, go together.

It is, after all, much easier to turn a kayak around than it is to turn a battleship.

I mentioned to you a couple weeks ago the draft changes being offered as revisions to Article II of the bylaws that govern our denomination. There are copies of the current text of Article II and the proposed revisions on the tables around the room.

As when any kind of change is offered to a large group of people, there has been a wide variety of responses to these proposed changes.

For those who are new to Unitarian Universalism or who are unfamiliar with some of the nuts and bolts of how we operate as a denominational body, our governing documents require us to periodically examine the things we hold as true and right and adjust them according to whatever new knowledge we have gained in the interim so that we remain relevant as a faith movement.

Sounds reasonable, right? Well, just because it sounds reasonable does not mean it is not upsetting to any number of people.

Remember the justice-based generational leapfrog experience I described earlier, where each generation goes further than the one before it? That's what we are experiencing now, as a denomination.

The proposed language for Article II, and efforts in recent years to include an 8th principle call on us to recognize systems of oppression and white supremacy both within and without our own organization, and work to dismantle those systems so that all may have the experience of a truly liberatory faith.

Sometimes, the work of self-examination and transformation asks us to do some challenging, even frightening things.

I remember when I was doing deep spiritual work in my 12 step recovery program years ago. I had resisted big change for a long time, and I was miserable. Finally, half measures having availed me nothing, I was ready to chuck it all in and do whatever I needed to in order to feel better. I was a mess. My sponsor smiled at me and said two things: You're exactly where

you need to be. And All you have to do is be willing to change everything about yourself.

It did not feel like a particularly liberatory moment, I assure you, but he was right. All of the things I had been holding onto about how I understood myself had to fall away so I could start over. I was afraid. What would I be if I let go of my anger? What would keep me together? What would happen if I got vulnerable? Would I not dissolve and blow away into nothingness? Would I find that I was a sham, a joke, a fool?

None of us likes to examine ourselves this closely and report on what we find. None of us wants to take a close look at what we believe and see that it is rooted in injustice. None of us wants to be ashamed or embarrassed to realize that what we have believed for so long has been a farce.

Why do you think there are so many people who follow that deranged Florida man? Because to examine the reality would expose the madness, and its easier to go along with a foolish fantasy than admit to having been played by a fraud.

But I digress.

As we examine the permanent and transient in Unitarian Universalism, we come back to the same foundation that Theodore Parker knew: the universal love of God. If love is at the center of what we do, the rest can adjust as it needs to through the ages, but it must always come back to love.

Some of the pushback I have been seeing toward the new proposed draft language is that there is no mention of our democratic process.

The commission created to do this work spent a lot of time thinking about the language they eventually produced, and I have some thoughts about that particular choice.

We understand democracy as what? Everyone gets a vote, right?

Everyone gets to participate in the conversation, and everyone gets a vote, and then the majority wins and we move on, right?

What if – and I ask you to take a breath and allow this thought to land gently so that it can be examined truthfully – what if we understood that the democratic process as we have been practicing it is a tool of white supremacy culture?

The vote of the majority often lands badly on the minority, after all.

So, if everyone gets to participate in the discussion, and everyone gets to vote, what are the chances that the needs of the minority are going to be fully met? And is it ok to let those needs go unmet?

The Article II commission worked to create a system that uplifts – shall we say ‘privileges’ – the voices of those parts of Unitarian Universalism that have for too long been excluded, or at least talked over.

We understand, unlike the US Supreme Court, that diversity makes for a richer, more well-rounded, smarter, more beautiful society. It makes for better science, it makes for better art, it makes for better governance. It makes for a better world.

And how do we achieve that? We have to give weighted consideration to the input of those groups that have been historically marginalized, excluded, targeted.

And democracy, the way we have been practicing it, leaves no room for that to happen. When the majority rules, well, the majority rules. And the needs of the minorities, those members of our world and our denomination whose wisdom and creativity we need so desperately to experience, are once again left out.

What does it mean for us to examine one of the seven principles that we have nearly turned into a creed, and acknowledge that it works at complete cross-purposes to our claimed goal of creating a world of peace with freedom and justice for all who inhabit it?

All you have to do is be willing to change everything about yourself, my sponsor said to me.

There are voices proclaiming that the draft language represents a power grab from the overly “woke” cabal in UUA leadership. Sound familiar?

What it means, though, is that there are some who fear that their voices, which have been dominant for so many years, might not carry the weight and authority they once did.

It’s almost as if they believe that being outvoted might feel unfair.

I say, and I believe this to be true, that we who enjoy so much privilege, and so much power, would do well to shut up and listen for a bit. We have been running things at the cost of what we might have been able to do if all voices were heard and valued. As people of privilege, it is our obligation to tear down the systems that unfairly favor us and exclude others. We must eliminate the systems that grant us access to opportunity and resources at the expense of others.

“Democratic process,” is not limited to one definition. Any process that consults with the governed population is democratic. We can re-think how we do this.

It can be terrifying indeed, to acknowledge that we might be benefitting from a system that is inherently unfair AND not of our making.

Transformation takes a lot of energy.

Transformation takes a lot of humility.

If we are to move through our season of darkness into an era of expanding illumination, we must be willing to take those risks and examine those truths.

We can do it. Remember, as human beings, we are designed for transformation.

The language changes through the years, but if love is at the center of the process, we will make it through.

May this be our practice and our prayer.

Amen.