

UUCL Message "Transformation"

Bethany Bert

Sunday, September 2, 2018

## Our September theme is Transformation.



"Personal transformation can and does have global effects.  
As we go, so goes the world, for the world is Us."

Marianne Williamson

Transformation comes in many forms – physical, emotional, philosophical. It can be superficial, like a coat of paint, or deep and lasting. Experiences can be transformational; relationships can transform a person; and religion has long been a medium of apparent transformation. Join us on Sunday mornings in September to explore the topic of transformation in your own life.

## Title and Blurb

“Transformation...Who’s in Charge?”

Do we know where we’re going?

Does the monarch pupa know what it’s becoming?

Is Consciousness a mere witness to, or an active participant in Transformation?

## Opening Words

“Chrysalis Diary”

From the Newberry Medal Winner “Joyful Noise—Poems for Two Voices” by Paul Fleishman, illustrated by Eric Beddows

Read by Bethany Bert and Bill Newby

## Hymns

(1) #90 From the Fret and Fever of the Day

(2) #288 All are Architects

## Sermon

“Transformation, Who’s in Charge?”

Bethany Bert with assistance by John Shepherd, Ellen Titus and Bill Newby.

## Closing Words

“Earth As Chrysalis” a poem by Bethany Bert

## Postlude

“Something Brand New” by Bethany Bert

Performed by John Sheppard, piano and Adrie Glass, vocal

# Transformation

Who's  
in  
Charge?

# Preface

It's more than a little intimidating, standing up here.

We're so very fortunate here as a congregation, to have the variety and quality of ministers and lay-persons we enjoy week after week, as they share with us from their deep well of knowledge, educate us on the ways in which we still need to work toward reform, and reflect with us on our own human failings.

There are a lot of very big shoes parked underneath this podium, and I'm so humbled to be in their presence.

Thank you to the worship committee for the invitation to do a service.

And thank you to all of you for the opportunity and the privilege to be with you this morning and to explore just a few brief ideas, that have occurred to me, on our theme for this brand new month of September, "Transformation".

# When Does Transformation Occur?

When we think of transformation we think of change that is dramatic and sudden. Change that seems to happen overnight.

And, indeed, when the final piece is in place, and the event is set in motion, transformation does seem sudden, sometimes surprising, and often magnificent and awe-inspiring.

But, although it may *seem* to spring from nowhere, the elements required for it to occur have been laid down in advance, like building blocks, one by one.

## Transformation

The chef carefully gathers his ingredients  
and prepares them  
measuring, chopping, whisking  
Then he waits  
And when the moment is right  
he applies the heat and transforms them  
into the masterpiece of gastronomic delight  
presented on our plate

The gardener, prepares the soil  
plants the seeds  
waters, weeds, wards off animals and  
Waits  
Then comes the day, her once barren plot of land  
is suddenly transformed into a sea of fragrance  
and color  
undulating in the summer breeze

The crust of Earth shifts  
Through hundreds of thousands of years  
the ground surrounding Gibraltar Strait  
slowly subsides, allowing a trickle, there, and here  
until suddenly, the waters of the Atlantic  
breach the land bridge.  
In the passing of a handful of months  
the cascade tumbles  
down a ramp several miles wide  
To transform the long-dry basin  
back into a lovely sea

Transformations

In an hour

a season

an eon

# Why All this Transformation?

As you know, Jan and Gary Stiles are leading an Attunement Meditation Group before each of the September services.

I hope a lot of you were able to attend this morning, and benefit from it.

Now, I'd like to ask you again to participate in a brief guided meditation as part of our service this morning.

Let's begin.

Please, sit comfortably upright and relax your legs,  
letting your feet dangle loosely to the floor.

Rest your hands easily on your thighs, palms gently  
open, facing slightly upward and inward, toward your heart.

Feel your eyelids becoming heavy and allow your eyes to  
softly close.

Send any remaining tension out of your shoulders and  
neck. Your head may bow ever so slightly.

Relax your jaw, allowing your tongue to rest  
comfortably in the floor of your mouth.

Breathe in...and out

And again, in...and out

Once more, in...and out

Find a small quiet hollow in the palm of your mind

And go inside.

Allow it to grow and expand around you

Dislodging everyday thoughts

As inexorably as the tide,

Shifting them aside

Melting them into the transparent membrane  
of it's surface.

Float, rest, in this place, for a moment.

*(fifteen seconds)*

With as little effort as possible,

Slowly,

Become aware of...

A universe, without change,  
an existence, that doesn't change,

*Something*, that is unchanging...

*(fifteen seconds)*

A deep breath in...and out

Gently wiggling the toes and fingers

Again, a deep breath in...and out

Swaying a little side-to-side and circling the torso

Once more, a deep breath in...and out

Bow the head,

And then raising it,

Very gradually open your eyes.

I hope that felt good.

And may it become some small piece of your own personal transformation.

But, did anyone have at least some degree of difficulty apprehending "Unchangeability"?

*(show of hands)*

It's not surprising.

If we're able to experience some sense of it, it's intangible, difficult to describe.

Some might call it "being in the presence of God" others might call it "experiencing Oneness", or we may be unable to give a name to it at all.

But it's a challenge, isn't it, maybe even feeling impossible for many of us, to get there.

In our ordinary life, we really have no reference point for something that doesn't change.

Everything around us is in flux. We're born, we grow and die. Civilizations rise, flourish and fall. The brightest stars form, roil and boil for a million years, and then burst into supernova.

The only thing that seems to be unchanging, is the universality of change itself.

If change is not absolutely indispensable to existence, it is, at the very least, deeply, deeply, inherent in it.

So perhaps the more legitimate question would be

“All this transformation, why *not*?”

# Who, What, and Where?

So we see that we, as individuals undergo transformation. Our societies undergo transformation. The earth, the sun, the moon and all the heavenly bodies are undergoing transformation.

From the tiniest fungi to the largest, grandest thing of which the human mind can conceive, all is changing, becoming, transforming.

Here in South Carolina, we've been blessed to call our own one of the most keen observers of nature the world can have ever known. Is anyone familiar with the name Rudy Mancke?

*(show of hands)*

That's nice. I knew there would be *(a lot) (a few) (one or two)* of you.

Rudy Mancke grew up in Spartanburg, SC and became a "Naturalist Extroadinaire". For years he hosted a show produced by SCETV, South Carolina Educational Television, called "NatureScene".

And through those years, Rudy infected us with his transparent love of the natural world, as we tagged along on his televised treks through parks, preserves and wilderness areas.

A little over a year after hurricane Hurricane Hugo had, in September 1989, devastated Bull Island, just north of Charleston, Rudy and his co-host, Jim Welch, re-visited the island to survey the recovery, and they took us along in a bittersweet episode of NatureScene.

The following words are extracted and paraphrased from that visit.

"Hurricane Hugo really changed this place and yet now you see that nature is coming back, slowly but surely. And that's typical of barrier islands. This is not the first hurricane and it won't be the last. Nature rebounds.

"Here's a typical animal on the island. The alligator. Alligators you know are one of those animals that rode out the storm fairly well. And this one, a small, baby alligator, is feeding on any kind of animal he can find in the water. They're good at recycling fish and small snakes or amphibians, and whatever else they can come up with.

"Down here we have some Dewberry, producing a lot of nectar and pollen and being visited by the American Painted Lady and Pearl Crescent Butterflies, and the Eight-Spotted Forester Moth. There's also a queen bumblebee coming to collect pollen to take back and feed the young. All using the Dewberry. You know we talk a lot about recycling. And here's a good example of one thing changing into something else.

"Over here is a Southern Magnolia that was a canopy tree, but now it's standing alone. This was once a magnificent maritime forest. That tree though, still alive, but just barely, is now becoming woodpecker. There are beetles there in the side of that tree. As it has been killed, beetle larvae got in there. Then the woodpeckers came and began to peck-peck-peck away and change beetle, which used to be Magnolia tree, into woodpecker. Things get changed. Nature doesn't throw up her hands and walk away.

"Certain plants and animals gained a great deal from Hugo. Others of course lost a great deal. It's totally a different look from what it was five and a half years ago. But nature bounces back.

“It's good to remind ourselves that nature isn't good, bad, right or wrong. It's just the way the world is. The system is wonderful. And even though the great maritime forest is gone, what a special place this still is!

There was a thing that Rudy would say in very nearly every episode. And I always listened for it. You heard something similar in this excerpt. At some point, while making observations on one or another form of wildlife as it was feeding, he would make this comment...and you can fill in the blanks. He would say something like, “Doing very well, turning *BLANK* into *BLANK*, right here in South Carolina”. Something about that simple but profound observation has always delighted me.

Turning, changing, transforming, one thing into something else.

## But What About Spiritual Transformation?

The transformation we observe in the natural world may offer us a means for understanding, or at least contemplating transformation of the spiritual.

It's not at all a new concept.

This lovely bit of artwork is available to us through the efforts of Holly Voley who scanned it for the public domain.

The artist was Pamela Coleman Smith.

The image is a 1909 card from the Smith-Rider-Waite Tarot Deck, which she illustrated.

Most of you are aware that Tarot cards are sometimes used for divination, or guidance, sometimes referred to as fortune-telling.

According to Wikipedia, when "The Magician" is dealt, it points to the talents, capabilities and resources at the inquirer's disposal. Depending on the card's placement in relation to other cards, the message is to tap into one's full potential rather than holding back, *especially when there is a need to transform something*. There are choices to make and directions to take. Guidance can arrive through one's own intuition or *in the form of someone who brings about change or transformation.*"

Importantly, this card "The Magician" is also meant to represent the Hermetic concept of "As Above, So Below."

The concept dates back at least to very Ancient Greek and Roman culture and is a wonderful rabbit hole for exploring some rainy afternoon on Wikipedia.

One interpretation of the principle is that the self and the universe are mutual mirror images, and that through understanding one, a person may find a means for understanding the other.



My personal interpretation puts the physical self and universe on one side of this relationship and the spiritual on the other.

# What is the unique role of consciousness in transformation?

Consciousness is a wondrous, enigmatic gift!

I believe many if not all of our fellow-species here on earth possess some form of it.

But, it may be that we humans over the course of our evolution have been developing a kind of extreme, or hyper-consciousness.

Of course it's possible that as the cow chews it's cud, it's actually contemplating life, the universe and everything. If our communication skills were better and we could break through the bovine-human language barrier, we could perhaps find that out.

But it seems more likely that the thought process of a cud-chewing cow is more akin to the thought process of a child prior to that event that as an adult he describes as his first memory.

A thought process that's characterized much less by well-considered decision making and rather more by instinctive and reactive behavior patterns.

Actually, there's a lot of that going around lately, in adult human circles as well, isn't there? But never mind that for now.

I imagine everyone here has more than once mulled over the question of Nature vs. Nurture.

First, we've got these little packets of DNA that predetermine certain limits to what we're capable of becoming, certainly on the physical side and arguably to some degree on the spiritual side as well.

But then, we're trained, by our parents, grandparents, older siblings and mentors.

And, continuing on throughout our lives, we retain a strong tendency to mimic what we observe, picking up and incorporating everything from slang phrases to styles of dress, and crucially, *concepts*.

We are the agents of each other's transformations.

But, we have and make, choices, about what we present to, and what we accept from, each other.

This, to me, indicates that consciousness is an active participant in, and not merely a witness to spiritual transformation.

These little transformations, happening day to day, will, I believe, ultimately be the building blocks of the great transformation that will surely occur in the fullness of time.

Is anyone familiar with the economist, Milton Friedman?

*(show of hands)*

Let me say that I'm not even remotely a fan of Milton Friedman. But there is one quote, at once beautiful and dreadful, from which we can, I think, derive some wisdom.

He's speaking about political policy here...that's the dreadful part. And I think the principle he's expressing has truth to it.

But, invoking the principle of "As Below, So Above" we find that the mundane, even dirty world of politics, may have something to enlighten us spiritually.

Here's the quote:

"Only a crisis - actual or perceived - produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable."

Now the direct political message here is interesting, but it's a discussion for another day.

In the context of our current topic, I would re-invent the quotation in this way: “It’s our responsibility, each one of us, to produce, nurture, embody and disseminate all the incremental building blocks of positive transformation that we possibly can during our achingly short, but blazingly brilliant lifetimes. Because when the big one comes, wherever it’s going to take us is going to depend on the building blocks that are lying around.”

We’ve been dealt “The Magician”, and the message is to tap into our full potential rather than holding back.

We *can* steer our own transformation.

We *are* what we eat.

We *become* what we do.

And the wolf that wins, *is* the one you feed.

## Closing Words

### Earth as Chrysalis

Transformation may be swift  
Or interminably slow  
What we are becoming, Well,  
Is that for us to know?

Separate little snowflakes  
Vast blanketing of snow  
We're on our way to something  
What it is we cannot know.

Droplets in the river  
Sea of ebb and flow  
We shall come soon to somewhere  
Maybe then, perhaps, we'll know.