

“Cauldron of Changes”

- a sermon by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM minister, delivered Sun. 8/17/14

Reading:

“The Layers”

-by Stanley Kunitz

I have walked through many lives,
some of them my own,
and I am not who I was,
though some principle of being
abides, from which I struggle
not to stray.

When I look behind,
as I am compelled to look
before I can gather strength
to proceed on my journey,
I see the milestones dwindling
toward the horizon
and the slow fires trailing
from the abandoned camp-sites,
over which scavenger angels
wheel on heavy wings.

Oh, I have made myself a tribe
out of my true affections,
and my tribe is scattered!
How shall the heart be reconciled
to its feast of losses?

In a rising wind
the manic dust of my friends,
those who fell along the way,
bitterly stings my face.

Yet I turn, I turn,
exulting somewhat,
with my will intact to go
wherever I need to go,
and every stone on the road
precious to me.

In my darkest night,
when the moon was covered
and I roamed through wreckage,
a nimbus-clouded voice
directed me:

“Live in the layers,
not on the litter.”

Though I lack the art
to decipher it,
no doubt the next chapter
in my book of transformations

is already written.
I am not done with my changes.

Song: "Cauldron of Changes"

***Cauldron of changes, feathers on the bone,
arc of eternity, ring made of stone.
We are the old people, we are the new people,
we are the same people . . . wiser than before.***

As I stand here before you I realize that I represent varying aspects of change. Whether it is your first time sitting in a UU worship service, your first time participating in any kind of organized worship, or you've just become part of this community of faith over the past year - I am likely a change from the ministers or spiritual leaders you may have experienced before, whether it be someone from your past in another faith tradition or the wonderful Rev. Joe Cleveland who served this congregation with great love and commitment over this past year as interim minister. And for some other folks here this morning, my presence is simply evidence of how some things just never change...

I also stand here before you humbled, grateful and truly blessed by this opportunity to work again with this congregation. Over the past two weeks as I've met with congregational leaders on our governing board, transition team, and various other ministry teams, I've been filled with a growing sense of awe and excitement at the transformations taking place here on so many levels, within individuals as well as the whole of the community. **The creative juices of change are flowing here!** The Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, most known for his doctrine of change being central to the universe, is credited with the adage that *"You cannot step twice into the same river."* His words have more than once floated to my mind over the past several months – and for a time I was hearing them as warning, with a focus on the "you cannot step twice" part. But my experiences so far - first with the in-depth heart-to-heart interview process with the UUFCM governing board back in April and then with the many meetings and discussions held over the past several weeks – all of this has reminded me that the adage truly means ***it's not possible*** to step twice into the same river – the river keeps flowing and changing. It is always transforming. At the heart of the new mission statement that came from this congregation's focused transition work accomplished this past year – ***"Fueled by love, transforming our lives and our world."*** – is affirmation of this community's growing understanding and commitment to being love's change agents, seeking transformation within and beyond ourselves.

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To echo the poet's words from our reading, like all of you, "I [also] am not who I was" when I last stood before you in my role as worship director. More than my role here has changed and as with any ministerial transition in a faith community, it will take us all some time to get acquainted and reacquainted with each other. This is a deep, ever evolving process of relationship - and **one sermon, one worship service does not a ministry make.** Believe me when I say that I had to repeat that line to myself more times than I can count while preparing for this morning. But even that repetitive effort didn't completely quell my anxiety-driven desire to cram all the best that I know into this one sermon ...for good measure...to make sure that you "get it" that I'm intelligent, worthy, witty, competent, compassionate - you can fill in the blank with any attribute you think necessary for you to like your minister. I could be wrong, but isn't this something of what trips us all up at the beginning of a new relationship, the very human desire to be loved and accepted?

I was visited very recently by a vivid memory of one of the now departed founding elders of this congregation, that dear, sweet, sometimes cantankerous curmudgeon Joel Welty. Another layer of learning came along with this memory, which I now see as holding some of the roots of my calling to ministry. From my earliest days as worship director here and continuing through to the very end of his life, Joel always got very excited when I attempted to offer a sermon reflection in my own voice, struggling to articulate my own perspective, rather than read someone else's sermon. It didn't seem to matter to him how disconnected my thoughts were or how much of my insecurity showed – he never failed to seek me out right after the service to thank me most heartily for bringing my own voice to the table. What mattered to him was the opportunity I'd provided for him to hear my authentic voice, regardless of the wobbliness of the attempt. In those moments, **Joel ministered to me**, and little by little called me forth with his love and support, gently pointing me toward the work of my heart.

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Cantadora storyteller and Jungian scholar Clarissa Pinkola Estes once wrote that *“Our work is to show we have been breathed upon—to show it, give it out, sing it out, to live it out in the topside world what we have received through our sudden knowings from story, from body, from dreams and journeys of all sorts.”* While I have grown to be very sparing with statements of belief, I do believe with every fiber of my being that the key to the transformation of the world begins here, within the human heart. But we must be willing to look beneath the surface of things – to “live in the layers, not on the litter” as the poet advises, in order to truly see and grasp the meaning held within both the changes that come our way as well as the transformation we seek within our own lives and in our world. There is a small poster tacked up in the hallway just outside our sanctuary door that contains these words of liberal theologian James Luther Adams: ***“Church is a place where you get to practice what it means to be human.”*** I believe that, too. You can swap out the word “church” for some other synonym if you need to, but the truth of the matter for me, and it may be the same for you, since it’s somewhat obvious we’re all here for “something”, is that being in loving supportive community is essential if we seek spiritual growth and transformation. That desire is what propelled me through these doors seven years ago and is a foundational conviction within my ministry today.

I am your minister...and you are mine. In this we share, of that I am certain.

Hear now the words of Mary Oliver, her poem “The Summer Day”...

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

Shalom and Salaam, Blessed be and Amen.