

On Becoming

Sermon by Rev. Kathleen Owens

May 15, 2005

Last week someone asked about the title of this sermon, “On Becoming.” On becoming what? I told her I couldn’t tell her, she would just have to come to the service to find out. For me it’s a tricky thing, giving titles so early before the sermon is written. My titles tend to be vague but I hope catchy enough to get people to wonder what it is I’m going to talk about— and in all honesty, sometimes I wonder myself. Perhaps in time, with practice, there will be a shift and this work of titling sermons will become easier— maybe. And that is what the sermon is about—on becoming—becoming something more than we are presently. It’s all about transformation: personally, institutionally, and in the larger world.

Once upon a time, long, long ago there was a man who was hurt, lying on a path in the woods. A group from a nearby village found him as they were looking for food. They picked up the unconscious man and took him back to their village with the hope of helping him get well. After a while, the man wakes up but can’t remember who he is, but with the gentle care of the villagers, he begins to feel better and to get stronger. A few days pass and he still can’t remember who he is or why he was in the woods. The villagers call him Stan. As Stan gets better he starts doing chores around the village but begins to feel funny; his vision blurs, his ears ring, and he experiences pain as light radiates out from his body. He doesn’t tell anyone about these changes but they keep happening. Soon, strangers come looking for Stan. They tell the village leaders that he is a criminal and shouldn’t be helped. Stan hears their discussion and has a final and very painful spasm and he remembers.

He is from a far-off village and his people, when they mature enough, go through a transformation, but this hasn’t happened for

several decades. So those in his home village who are in power are hunting down the few who have lived long enough for this transformation to take place. Fear and ignorance drove the village’s leaders to isolate and kill those who are going through the transformation— fear of the unknown, fear of losing what they have known, fear of what is to come. While they are talking, Stan transforms into a being of light, radiating good will and peace. He goes home to his village, unafraid and unharmed, to spread the good news of this transformative process. It is painful and scary but worth it. It is who they are meant to be, it is their destiny.

This story comes out of modern day science fiction but has its roots in literature and in our mythology. Children’s literature is full of stories of transformation, on becoming. From the Velveteen Rabbit to Pinocchio to stories in the Christian New Testament, our culture is full of these stories. They are stories about people becoming real or more real than they were. We seem to have an inherent need for these stories; there is in us a need to become more real. Have you felt it? There is a longing in us to be transformed into something more. We want more in our lives and more for our world. The “more” we long for isn’t found in the stores and outlet malls; the “more” we yearn for is far deeper than material possessions. We yearn for meaning in our lives and hope that somehow we can make a difference. We want connection.

Stan in our story experiences transformation from within. It is a very modern-day story about change; the light can come from within and for many people even today that may be possible. But the Velveteen Rabbit, Pinocchio, and other characters in most of the stories we know, have encounters with a presence, a spirit, a fairy, a divine being outside of themselves. Throughout

the Gospels according to Mark, Matthew, and Luke there are many stories of people becoming whole, becoming more real after an encounter with Jesus, a person who some say was Love personified. The Buddha, Moses, Abraham, Mohammed, Sarah, Mary, Jesus: all became more than they were when they encountered the Most Holy. Coming into contact with Love—a love without judgment, a love that speaks truth, a love that is sustaining and nourishing—coming into contact with that kind of love makes us more real. And isn't that the kind of love we try to practice whenever we come together? Isn't this the kind of community that we long to become?

After what seemed like years of searching, of struggling, of wanting a place to call home, a close friend of mine found it not far from her hometown. She found her way into a Unitarian Universalist church and was greeted warmly. A friendly person introduced herself and invited my friend to sit with her during the worship service. There was beautiful music, the sermon even had some good ideas in it, and clearly the people enjoyed each other's company. After the service and coffee, my friend left feeling elated and was eager to return. She was dismayed to find the church was virtually closed during the week and that she would have to wait a whole week to see and learn, talk and worship with these folks again. Finally, she had found this liberal, growing, and challenging faith, one with an outward vision and social justice causes to work on—a faith with a rich and intriguing history—and they only met once a week. And in the summer time, the church practically closed its doors. Now there is the joke that Unitarian Universalists are the only people God trusts to give the summer off, but my friend found the structure difficult. Didn't people need communal spiritual nourishment more than once a week? Wasn't their community worth something during the summer? It begs the questions: why do we come to church? And what does membership in a church mean?

My friend shared her concerns with me, and I have to admit that those two questions have

plagued me for a long time. I suspect they will continue to do so. We come to church for many reasons and stay for others. I think people come to church with a deep longing for connection, for community, for healing. But what is membership about? Surely it's more than signing your name in a book and pledging a specific amount of money to keep the lights on and the doors open. For some churches, that has been it.

I want membership to mean something more than that. I want membership, the process of becoming a member in a church, to grab hold of me and plunge me into a community deep and wide, transforming me in the process. I want my involvement in a congregation to change the way I think about and live my life. I want church to be the place where I can practice living out those Principles we're so fond of. I want the church community to hold me gently accountable for living the way I say I want to live. Here at Neighborhood Church Jim and I have talked with our new members, discussing what being a member means. We ask you to have an active spiritual life; we want you to attend church regularly; we ask that you do one thing a year involving religious education for children and youth (learn a child's name, for instance); participate in some service to the church; and pledge financially as you are able. To be worth your time, energy, and resources, membership needs to be a transformative experience. How do you experience your membership here? Has being a member here at Neighborhood transformed your life? Is it still happening?

Today we acknowledged and honored new members. We welcomed them into our community to join us on this journey of faith. Their ideas, hopes, dreams, and questions will be added to our own and thus this community is transformed with their inclusion. They have joined for many reasons. I hope they have seen here a community that is loving and affirming, but also one that will challenge them and ask them to grow. Maybe some have joined because they have already experienced a change in their

lives. And now with their joining, they are transforming Neighborhood Church.

Becoming a member of a community is a significant act. But I wonder what happens if we are not changed by their presence? What happens if we do not change how business gets done around here? I know this might be hard to hear, but let us consider these questions. What happens if classes or worship services remain the same? What does it mean when we gladly accept new members and keep living the way we always have? There is a phenomenon in churches regarding membership that is called the revolving door. This is when a church takes in as many new members in the front door as there are people who are leaving through the back door. These are the churches that stay at the same size for decades. Maybe the revolving door happens because while they welcome new members, how church happens does not reflect or incorporate those new folks. Church happens the way it has happened for decades and so they remain the same kind of church.

Every four years, the Unitarian Universalist Association appoints a Commission on Appraisal Committee that studies a topic for three years and creates a report. The report is filled with their research, interviews, and suggestions for change around the given subject. The latest subject studied was membership and what it means to be a member in our faith. The report is titled *Belonging*, the meaning of membership. The report states, “Individuals do not simply become members of a community. By their joining and their participation, the community is reconstituted, reformed, changed; it is no longer quite what it was before. In this fact there is hope.”¹

I like that last sentence: “In this fact there is hope.” Institutions are oftentimes slow to change, because people are. And people make up the institution. But when new people come in, if they are to stay, institutional change must occur. And this is scary. Any change is. I struggle with this. I want change, but at my pace, and I want things to change as I think they

should. Sound familiar? (Be honest.) And I live in the tension of wanting transformation and wanting things to stay the same. But we can’t have it both ways.

One of the guiding principles for me around change is this: I know change ultimately means life and growth. It means I often will not get the change I want at the pace I want, but I will work for it and encourage it if it is a change that will ultimately benefit the larger community. It may not be what I want, but it may be what we need. Change that reflects our vision of encouraging and growing lives of service, integrity, and joy: I’m more than willing to work for that. I’m willing to change my plans for that greater vision. It is scary and sometimes painful, but I believe transformation is the role of the church. This church, this faith we practice offers to you a place for personal transformation. Upon personal transformation, the way we do church will change. Once we are changed, once we transform our ideas and practice of church and how it works, we go out into the larger world and live our principles, live our lives differently. Thus we change. We transform our part of the larger world. We are about transformation; we are about becoming.

Once there was a woman who was sick. She had been sick for so long and she was so tired of being sick. She traveled many places seeking help. She saw many different doctors, tried different kinds of medicines and therapies, but nothing worked. She had spent all her money and still she wasn’t better. In fact, she was getting worse. In her travels she heard about another healer, someone different from all the rest. Tired as she was, she still clung to hope. Maybe this time it would be different. She asked about him, his practice, and his technique. The stories were vague but people spoke with such enthusiasm she grew excited about his arrival into town. Gathering all her strength and courage she went to the place where the healer was. A huge crowd surrounded him and she doubted she could get close enough but she persisted, slowly edging her way forward. “If I can get close enough, if I can just

touch him, it will be enough.” Seeing him near, she reached out and her hand brushed against his coat. Immediately she felt better. The healer turned and demanded to know who touched him. His disciples and students were confused. Who could know who touched him? They looked at the crowd. The woman answered the healer’s question and told him why she did it. His eyes were full of love and his reply was gentle: “My dear one,” he said, “your faith has made you well. Go in peace.”²(The word “healing” is derived from the word “whole.”)³ She walked away from that encounter

transformed, and in turn her life was changed forever.

Barbara Pescan asks, “Can we live in this gaze of blessing? Can we see ourselves and others in that Love?”⁴ May we be about the important work of personal and institutional transformation. May we welcome and integrate all kinds of people, styles, and ideas. May we become our holy Church.

Blessed Be and Amen.

¹ UUA report on Belonging, the meaning of membership, page 28.

² The Gospel According to Mark 5:24-34.

³ Harvey Cox, *When Jesus Came to Harvard*, page 181.

⁴ From the morning’s reading, Rev. Barbara Pescan’s poem “Blessing” from *Meditation Manual Morning Watch*, page 43