



The Way of Transformation
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Rev. Suzelle Lynch
UU Church West

SERMON

Transformation is one of those words with a simple meaning. It just means a change, a change in form or structure. But when we use it in church, it becomes one of those words with a big meaning: it means to become deeper, more open. To become more loving, more joyful, more at peace, more related to oneself and to others. Here, transformation means the kind of change that results in understanding ourselves as part of a larger Wholeness.

The Unitarian Universalist theologian Henry Nelson Weiman once said: "What we all want more than anything else in the world is for our lives to have some genuine significance -- to be part of something greater than ourselves." He continued, "For some this is family, for some work, for some a business, for some their church, for some a country. For the truly religious person that something is to be part of the evolving 'City of God', the growth of mutual support, enhancement and meaning among all humans and all parts of the living universe."

Now, how many of you stopped listening when I quoted Weiman's phrases "the truly religious person," and "the evolving 'City of God,'"? Those aren't phrases I easily identify with, I know, until I remember what this deeply Unitarian Universalist theologian meant by them. For Weiman, the evolving city of god is the growth of mutual support, enhancement and meaning among all humans and all parts of the living universe. And the truly religious person is someone who wants to be a part of that growth. Now that's something we can relate to!

Weiman devoted most of his life to answering this question: What operates in human life with such character and power that it will transform (hu)man (beings) as (t)he(y) cannot transform (them)selves(?) He asked, "What operates in human life with such character and power that it will save humanity from evil and lead human beings to the best human life can ever reach?" He believed that the answer to this question was God,

but not god as a noun, a person, a Creator, or any other kind of discrete, all-powerful, omniscient god-blob or god lump. More on that later. He also believed that there were certain conditions human beings had to meet if we were to be saved from evil and led to our best and highest potential. [I have altered and divided up Weiman's quote to best make sense of it when spoken aloud. It can be found in "My Intellectual Autobiography," by Henry Nelson Weiman, at http://urantiabook.org/sources/weiman_autobiography.htm]

Weiman knew that the question of what we believe about God doesn't get at the heart of the matter. And so he asked his different question – to which god was the answer.

God is that which operates in our life with transforming character and power. This was Weiman's answer. Does that mean he was a theist, believing in a supernatural being? No, in fact he was one of the signers of the second Humanist Manifesto. But he did not agree totally with humanism, which avers that all gods are products of the human mind, and have no reality outside our minds. Weiman's work was in the school of "Process Theology," which holds that everything participates in god.

Let me explain. Process theology evolved in the 1920s from the "process philosophy" or "philosophy of organism" of British mathematician Alfred North Whitehead. Whitehead sought to shape a philosophy that would respond to the discoveries of post-Newtonian physics which shifted the perspective of science on the nature of matter. Matter was no longer viewed as made up of discrete, concrete particles; matter was shown to be activity and motion and relationships. In his 1929 book "Process and Reality," Whitehead wrote, "the most concrete elements in our experience, ... the final real things of which the world is made up, ... are drops of experience, complex and interdependent." (Process and Reality, corrected version, p. 18) Whitehead's philosophy made the case for seeing reality, ultimate reality, as relationship instead of matter. Process

theology, posits a God that is not different from all other reality, a God that is not "unmoved mover," not static and unchanging; a God that functions as "the lure" which draws all things, all persons, all realities toward their ultimate fulfillment and unfolding. Another way to say this is that God is that which sustains the processes by which the world is continuously being created.

Thus for Weiman, God occurred. God happened. God rose up, sparked, splashed, emerged, manifested. God occurred in relationships, in the intersections of beings and events. "God," he said, "is the integrating process at work in the universe." "God," he said, "is the growth which springs anew when old forms perish."

Learning about Weiman's ideas in a seminary classroom was tremendously liberating! Finally, a way to construe the word god that made sense to me. As many of you know, I was raised as a Unitarian Universalist during the 60s, a time when most Unitarian Universalists were humanists. I was taught that in our religion there was no god, no bible, no creed, no doctrine, no Jesus, no heaven, no hell... . But as a child, I believed in God intuitively. Children, in their closeness to the womb-time where there was no separation between creator and creation, in their dependency, know that there is something more encompassing and powerful than individuality, than human personality. And thus learning about Weiman satisfied my soul, for it gave me a god that didn't have to be the "old omnipotent guy in the sky," that didn't have to be supernatural. Weiman was an empiricist, who found evidence of god in our human experiences, in our relationships with ourselves, with nature, and with other persons. Imagine! Empirical evidence of god. It's a concept to warm even the most rational-minded soul among us!

I'd like to tell you a story that illustrates Weiman's ideas. It comes from Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen's book, "Kitchen Table Wisdom." It's a story about her uncle, a doctor, who fought in

World War II. Coincidentally, this war also profoundly shaped the thinking of process theologians. Traditional systematic Protestant theology, which was optimistic about human nature, had been shaken to its roots by the first world war, the Nazi holocaust, and the nuclear holocaust inflicted by the bombs we dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. A kind of neo-orthodoxy had arisen that emphasized the sinfulness of humankind and the tragedy of human existence – God, clearly, as ultimate, unchanging reality needed to attribute such evil to human free will. The process theologians, however, went in the direction of science, toward the understanding that all reality is interdependent, believing that this new way of understanding the world had more power to avert our destruction of the world than did chastisement for our sins.

But I digress. Here is Dr. Remen's story:

"My uncle was one of a group of physicians following the troops," she writes. "Acting on false information, the soldiers pressed forward, believing the ridge on which they were advancing had been cleared of enemy fire. As they moved out of cover, the hidden enemy opened fire and within seconds the field was covered with wounded and dying men. The enemy continued to ... fire. No one could stand upright. It was more than 12 hours before air reinforcements (would arrive) My uncle, crawling on his belly with supplies strapped to his back, placed tourniquets, stopped bleeding, took messages sometimes written on the back of worn photographs, and gave last rites, during all that time. ... It was clear that he had saved dozens of lives.

He was decorated for this action and his picture was on the front page of our ... newspaper... . I was about seven at the time, and with a real hero in my family, I instantly became the talk of the second grade. ... He had been given leave and was coming to visit us. I was giddy with excitement.

... . Always a shy man, (my uncle) seemed uncomfortable with all the fuss, and uneasy as neighbor after neighbor came by to shake his hand. Finally I found my moment. Climbing into his lap, I told him how brave I thought he was and that I was sure he was never afraid of anything. Smiling, he told me that this was far from the case, that he had been more frightened than ever before in his life. Severely disappointed, I blurted out, 'But why did they give you a medal then?'

Gently he explained to me that anyone who wasn't afraid in situations like was a fool and they don't give medals to ... fools. That being brave does not mean being unafraid. It often means being afraid and doing it anyway.

Remen reflects, "It was the first of the many teachings about courage I have received in my lifetime and it meant a great deal to me. At the time, I was afraid of the dark and deeply ashamed about this. But if my uncle who was a hero was also afraid, then perhaps there was hope for me as well. By telling me of his fear, my uncle had freed me. His heroism became a part of my story as well as a part of his." (pp. 49-50)

What happened in the conversation between the young Rachel Naomi Remen and her uncle is what Henry Nelson Wieman called a "creative event," or a "creative interchange."

Creative interchange is a process in which two forces come together and create something larger than the sum of their parts. Wieman was particularly interested in this process as it occurred involving people, and believed that such moments are the times "in which new meaning and value emerges." He said that in these moments, we human beings do our human part in creating the universe. In other words, in moment of creative interchange, God sparks up.

Moments of creative interchange actually have four parts. What happens first is that we have an emerging awareness of "qualitative meaning;" meaning communicated to us from

something outside ourselves, usually a person. For Rachel Naomi Remen, the meaning began to emerge in her feeling of disappointment at hearing that her uncle had not been quite as she imagined him; that he, too, had been afraid. She blurted out, 'But why did they give you a medal then?'

The second part of creative interchange is that we integrate meanings in the new event with meanings in an old event. This most often is an internal process, something we do in our own hearts and minds. For Remen, this was integrating her old understanding of fear and courage and her shame about her own fears, with the new meaning from her uncle – that courage included being afraid.

According to Weiman, as we integrate new meanings, we begin to appreciate the world more, and our own lives take on greater value. This is the third part of creative interchange. In the conversation with her uncle, Rachel Naomi Remen found herself freed from the shame she felt because she was afraid of the dark, and this gave her hope. She began to appreciate not just her uncle, the hero, but also herself. Her way of understanding herself, the world, and other people had expanded.

And the last part of a creative interchange, is what Weiman calls growing community. He writes, "If you and I have expanded our appreciable worlds as individuals, then the relations we have with our respective communities will also prove creatively transforming, such that (those communities) will grow in healthy, non-competitive ways." This last step moves us beyond ourselves and propels us back out into the world towards justice, care of others, and deepening of relationships. And if you've ever read anything by Rachel Naomi Remen, you know that this is what she is doing with her life.

In other words, when creative interchange takes place, we find ourselves more open, more loving, more joyful, more at peace, more related to ourselves and to others: more at one with the larger Wholeness of which we are a part. We find ourselves

transformed, and the people around us grow, too. Weiman said, and I believe it, that these moments of creative interchange happen all the time. They are how we co-create the Universe, how we expand meaning, and thus expand the possibilities for all human being, and all beings.

Weiman was once challenged by an orthodox minister who had heard him lecture on some aspect of process (theology). The minister asked, "Where, in your theology, is God,?" to which Weiman is reported to have answered: "If you tell me your experience, and I really, really hear you, and then I tell you of my experience, and you really, really hear me, there, in that exchange, is God, and we are all three transformed." This is how we participate in God; it is Weiman's "empirical evidence" of God. God is not some "guy in the sky" watching over us and pulling our strings, but is instead, that quality present within all creation which gently pulls all living things to transcend themselves. Thus, in Weiman's hypothetical conversation, in which each really hears the other, there is a transformation as each integrates the other's experience into their own, and the result includes God which also is transformed. (From Jack Young, "The Interdependent Web; Rational Perspective," www.bruu.org/sermons)

This is the way of transformation, and I say it is why we're here in this congregation. But I have to tell you that like most things of value, it's a wee bit more complicated and difficult than I have described so far.

Weiman believed that there were four important ways in which we needed to challenge ourselves. Four conditions we needed to meet regarding transformation. First, he believed that we needed to expand the range and diversity of what we could know, evaluate, and control as individuals. He suggested that we seek after new knowledge, both book-learning and experiential.

Second, Weiman believed that we need to increase our ability to understand appreciatively other persons and peoples

across barriers of estrangement and hostility. About this, my colleague, the Rev. Dennis Daniel wrote, "We (UUs) work hard at being liberal, being accepting, being understanding of personal differences. Nonetheless, we are just as capable of racism, ageism, sexism, homophobia, and religious intolerance as other human beings. ... I personally have found that working in my community to combat racism and to feed and house the homeless has enlarged my understanding of other people. ... It also has made me very humble, because the work has taught me how very little I actually know about how homeless or racially oppressed people make sense of their lives and how very often I am likely to make ... assumptions about their values and their attitudes." (from "Growing a Soul," a sermon from 8-19-2001)

The third challenge, according to Weiman, is to increase our personal freedom, but the freedom he means is not freedom to do as we please, but freedom from being a victim or a drifter. Weiman defined freedom this way: "my ability to absorb any cause that is acting upon me in such a way that the resulting consequences express my character and fulfill my purpose."

What does he mean by "absorb any cause that is acting upon me?" Well, he's being polite here. What he is saying is that we must learn to face people and events and circumstances that push our buttons, anger us, intimidate us, confuse us, or frighten us. And not just face them, but absorb them -- be present and open to them.

Let me give you an example of this from my experience. Last year, when I was still living in Bremerton, I was finally given a speaking part in the annual county celebration for Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. I'd been a behind-the-scenes worker on the event for the previous six years, but had never been asked to speak.

Needless to say, I was excited. And I prepared carefully. But then the ceremony began, and it began with an invocation given by a major from the Salvation Army, who basically asserted

in his prayer that anyone who did not believe in and serve the Lord exactly as he does was an agent of Evil. His words hit me like a slap -- I was shocked, angry and frightened, and became more so as speaker after speaker echoed his religiously bigoted and exclusivist theme.

But it soon dawned on me that my job there was to give the Benediction. The Benediction, which means good words. The closing words. I had been given the gift of offering up good words at the end -- words that could unite us, words that could heal. I began to breathe deeply, to let go of my anger. I began to listen for the best in what the rest of the speakers had to say. I took out a pen, and wrote a brief introduction to my Benediction prayer expressing my gratitude for being able to bring the presence of religious diversity to the event. And when I got up on the dais I preached my prayer, with all my heart and soul. I was afraid -- afraid to come out as a non-Christian, but I did it anyway. I was afraid I would be misunderstood, but I did it anyway. I had calmed my anger, remembered who I was, and reminded myself that my peace was to express my character, my faith, and to lead the audience in the most inclusive, most compassionate UU-style prayer I could. When I finished I felt joyfully connected to every person in the room.

Weiman's fourth challenge summarizes the first three and takes them deeper. He asks us to increase our capacity to integrate into the uniqueness of our own individuality a greater diversity of experiences so that more of all we encounter becomes a source of enlightenment and strength rather than impoverishment and weakness.

He urges us to welcome all our life's experiences and to allow them to strengthen our souls, to widen the openness of our hearts and minds, to deepen the well of our compassion, and to fuel us for more experiences.

What we all want more than anything else in the world is for our lives to have genuine significance -- to be part of something greater than ourselves.

Process theology declares that we are part of that something greater, that our lives do have genuine significance, and that, indeed, we will unfold to the greatest we humans can reach, we can be saved from participating in evil and work for the good, when we recognize who we are,

when we are willing to commit our lives in service of a greater mystery which we may never fully understand,

and when we open our lives to the larger creativity within which we live and breathe and have our being.

May we take up this challenge today, and every day.

Amen.