

Message Coming Out: Leaving Comfortable Places

April 8, 2018

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Spring is the time of year when new life emerges all around us. Leaf buds swell and unfurl in the warming air; daffodils, tulips, grass, and other plants push up new shoots through the softening soil; flowers begin to open. Seeds dropped from last year's plants begin to sprout. Squirrels and chipmunks, bears and beavers emerge from their long winter hibernation. Insects hatch from eggs laid in the fall, and soon little caterpillars begin to munch on the new greenery of spring.

Before long, those caterpillars will spin a cocoon or form a chrysalis, depending on whether they are moths or butterflies. They enter a 7 to 10 day period called metamorphosis.

This metamorphosis is such a complete transformation that what comes out at the end of those 7-10 days is completely different from what went in. It will look completely different when it emerges than it did when it went in. It will be a different shape; it will be different colors. It will have wings, and will be able to fly instead of just crawl. Amazing!

What is really interesting to me is that in order to make this transformation, the pupa at one point dissolves inside the chrysalis. Scientific American explains it like this:

First, the caterpillar digests itself, releasing enzymes to dissolve all of its tissues. If you were to cut open a cocoon or chrysalis at just the right time, caterpillar soup would ooze out. But the contents of the pupa are not entirely an amorphous mess. Certain highly organized groups of cells known as imaginal discs survive the digestive process. Before hatching, when a caterpillar is still developing inside its egg, it grows an imaginal disc for each of the adult body parts it will need as a mature butterfly or moth—discs for its eyes, for its wings, its legs and so on. In some species, these imaginal discs remain dormant throughout the caterpillar's life; in other species, the discs begin to take the shape of adult body parts even before the caterpillar forms a chrysalis or cocoon. Some caterpillars walk around with tiny rudimentary wings tucked inside their bodies, though you would never know it by looking at them.

Change is inevitable in life. We change our shapes as we grow, or, in the case of some of us older folk, shrink a little. We change our haircut, our clothing styles, our places of residence or our jobs. Our likes and dislikes, especially for foods, can change over the years. I recently realized that, while I used to enjoy beer, I don't really like it much anymore. Maybe that's happened to some of you.

We change inside, too. We change our minds – hopefully – in response to new information or insight into how others feel. Hearing stories like the one we just heard, helps us understand and empathize. That can give us the impetus to open our minds and hearts to new possibilities.

This congregation proudly states in every Order of Service, "We are a Welcoming Congregation." This means that a lot of study, preparation, and internal work have gone into

understanding the transformation of identity involved in coming out as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. This community, like Laura's congregation, is amazingly open and welcoming to these folks.

Gender-queer folk, like my dear friend and colleague Laura, have taken their place at this welcome table, too. So have those who find themselves attracted, and make life commitments, to multiple partners at the same time, and those who have no attraction to anyone at all in a partnering way.

As you may notice, our work of understanding and accepting difference is not yet complete. Perhaps it never will be, but that's part of what makes life interesting, isn't it? As we come out of our safe, but rather rigid, preconceived notions about people, we too are in a transformation of sorts.

For me, it was not all that hard to understand, or at least empathize with, the transformation that transgender and genderqueer folk experience. I have had my own experiences with metamorphosis. In my mid fifties, I found myself in a process that was deeply unsettling. My lifelong faith in Christianity was dissolving before my eyes, leaving me feeling like I didn't know how to relate to life. I didn't know what I believed any more.

Yet the core of who I was to become, the imaginative discs of the Unitarian Universalist you see before you today, existed in that goo, and when the old confining body of thought habits dissolved, those parts of me had room to begin to grow. Here is how I felt: the tight wrapping that had confined and constricted my thoughts and beliefs began to crack open, and the color and pattern of my new wings began to show. [show wings under my robe]

Have you ever reached a point in your life where you have felt tightly wrapped, unable to move? When old ideas of self or the world were dissolving, while new ideas to replace them were elusive?

When you felt "undone," like the pupa in the dark, an amorphous mass of gelatinous goo?

Uncomfortable and unnerving as this feeling may be, it is a sign of growth, of change, of a shift from one form of being in the world to a new one, perhaps a change as radical as that of the caterpillar turning into a monarch butterfly.

And then, without understanding how it happens, a new sense of self, a new way of understanding the world and your place in it, begins to form. You are still in your chrysalis; you haven't come out yet, but you feel the new you taking shape, sprouting those crumpled, wet appendages that will eventually let you fly!

When the transformation is complete inside the hard casing of the chrysalis, the shell begins to grow transparent. If you look hard enough, you can see the pattern of the wings inside. Then a crack begins to form. The butterfly begins to struggle to emerge.

If you are in the process of transformation right now, whether a transformation of gender identity, sexual orientation, spiritual orientation, political or social identity, a new status or role in life, a creative spirit that wants to emerge – like Jeff here, who came out this morning as a violinist – it is my hope and prayer that you will find the welcome and acceptance you deserve and long for, here in this First Parish community and in your other circles of loved ones, co-

workers, friends and associates. Never doubt, my friends, that this is the sort of radical inclusion that will ultimately change the world.

I'd like to close with a little excerpt from the book, *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves*.

Jennifer Finney Boylan relates:

Early in my own transition, back in 2000, I used to make "milk runs" en femme to towns where I did not know anyone, to see how well I could pass in the world as a woman. It was a frightening prospect, at a time when no one at my place of work - Colby College, in Waterville, Maine, where I was a professor of English - knew I was emerging as trans. I was an awkward, frightened soul back then, wearing too much makeup, teetering in heels I did not know how to walk in, crowned by a wig that could have doubled, in its spare time, as a sparrow's nest. How I found the courage to drive from my home down to Freeport, Maine, to try on corduroy skirts at L.L. Bean, I cannot tell you. I remember the mantra I used to have back then, though. I used to whisper it to myself as I walked through the world: *Be brave. You are trying to learn something.*

One day, I found myself trying on jeans in The Gap. It was clear from the expression on the saleswoman's face that I was not "passing" - nowhere near it. I told myself to be brave, but it wasn't much help. The thing I was learning - and not, as it turned out, for the last time - was how hard all of this was going to be, and how very difficult it was going to be for me to find my voice in the world that now lay before me.

As I exited the store, I passed a woman and her daughter, who were on their way in. The little girl looked at me, with my curious makeup and my unfortunate wig, and she turned to her mother.

"Momma," she said, in a voice of astonishment. "Who was that?"

"That, honey," the woman replied to her daughter, "that was a human being."

May we always remember that we are all human beings, wonderful, diverse, many-faceted, full of amazing gifts and with seeds of greatness hidden inside. May we accept ourselves and each other as we transform, sometimes over and over, into the humans we are meant to be.

May it be so.