

The Fire of Transformation

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Please join me in a moment of meditation and prayer. Spirit of Life, we open our minds, hearts, and spirits to all that is good and we pray for a spirit of renewal and new life to dwell in us deeply. May the words of my mouth, the meditations of all our hearts, and the ways we live our lives bring more love, justice, and compassion into this world. May it be so and amen.

Let me begin this morning by saying, “Happy Spring!”, “Happy Easter!”, and “Happy Passover!” My partner, Lisa, and I were fortunate to spend Easter in Italy this year. We traveled with our niece’s high school choir that performed in several of the basilicas in Venice, Florence, and Rome. It’s a tough life! It was quite an amazing experience as you can imagine but we thought of you—and Kevin and the choir—and trusted y’all had a fantastic Easter service here.

I know some of you are still wondering who I am, where I came from and how I ended up a Unitarian Universalist. After all this is only my second time preaching here at BUF and you are still getting to know me. Here’s the short story: For those of you who find birth order and family systems theory fascinating, I am the second of four children, born and raised in Charleston, South Carolina, in a working class family, where I am the truth-teller and fixer. I’m working on that! For those of you who like personality inventories, I am an ENFJ on the Myer-Briggs and an “8” on the Enneagram. For those of you who like religious, political, and personal history, I am a former Southern Baptist, Republican-voting, conservative Christian, who almost married a man until I realized I am a lesbian. Now that right there is enough sermon—and therapy—material to last for years!

Lisa and I moved to Bellingham almost two years ago to be closer to her family and we are enjoying our new lives here. I am also enjoying getting to know y’all by working with you as a Community Minister. Thank you for being willing to be in partnership with me.

As for how I ended up a Unitarian Universalist, well, that’s a longer story, and I’ll share some of it with you later in this sermon.

We are in a wonderful season of the year. Spring has officially begun. Flowers are blooming. The days are lengthening because the light shines a few more minutes each day. We are getting ever closer to the most beautiful season in Bellingham—you know, the one y’all try to keep secret so others won’t want to move here! Everywhere we look, the signs point to new birth. They tell us that the earth is being reborn and that life is being renewed.

But before we made our way to Easter Sunday recently, several congregations embraced our UU theological diversity by having Good Friday services and Passover Seders. I think of my friend and colleague, Tim Atkins, who is the Director of Religious Education at Morristown Unitarian Fellowship in Morristown, New Jersey, and a member of the Board of Trustees for the UUA. He

facilitated a Good Friday service that focused on the “Seven Last Words of Jesus”, and seven people courageously examined the dark times in their lives beneath the shadow of the cross.

I think of Carole Galanty and Robin Kottman, co-chairs of L’Chaim, the Jewish Celebrations and Awareness Group from my former UU Congregation in Atlanta, who held their Annual Passover Seder last night, where they told the stories of bondage and enslavement and then told the stories of freedom. I have found over the years that the deeper I am able to experience the season of darkness, the more I am able to fully appreciate the light. Maybe you’ve discovered this too.

Richard Rohr, in his book, *Hope Against Darkness*, says, “Spiritual transformation is often thought of as a movement from darkness to light. In one sense that is true, but in another sense it is totally false. We forget that darkness is always present alongside the light. Pure light blinds, only the mixture of darkness and light allows us to see. Shadows are required for our seeing.”¹

Shadows are required for our seeing. I imagine all of us have had shadow times, those times when we fall so far down that we don’t believe we’ll ever get back up. Sometimes our lives become a complete mess before we experience transformation. During those times we face the dark night of the soul and walk through the fire of transformation.

In alchemy, fire is considered the primary agent of change. It is the agent of action. Fire has the potential to create something new or to destroy life. Uncontrolled fire raging through a forest can have devastating effects like what is happening in California right now, or what happened in our own state last year, which was declared the largest wildfire season in our history. Controlled fire that warms our skin, cooks our food, and gives us light, has a positive effect. The fire of transformation, I believe, is a combination of the two. When we live in the fire, we feel its heat.

Fire consumes and reduces whatever is in its path to ashes. When we are personally, spiritually, or emotionally reduced to ashes, it’s hard to believe we can be reborn from those ashes, like the phoenix.

Myths and legends of the phoenix exist all over the world. According to the writers of ancient Greece, the phoenix was a magnificent bird larger than an eagle, with an extraordinarily beautiful plumage of red and gold feathers. It dwelt in Arabia, nearby a cool well. Each morning at dawn, it would bathe in the water and sing such a beautiful song, that the sun-god would stop his chariot to listen. It was the only creature of its kind and was said to live for up to 1000 years. When it knew its life was to end, the phoenix would retreat to a palm tree in the Arabian desert and build a nest of herbs and spices during a single night. As the sun rose at dawn, the nest would burst into flames, and the phoenix would perish. But at the same time, a young phoenix would arise from the flames of the nest, born anew.² There are other myths of the phoenix from Egypt, Japan, China, and Russia.

¹ Richard Rohr, *Hope Against Darkness: The Transforming Vision of St. Francis in an Age of Anxiety*. St. Anthony Messenger Press, Cincinnati, OH, p. 163.

² Megan Balanck, <http://www.ancientspiral.com/phoenix.htm>

The phoenix is a symbol of triumph, beauty, hope, and love. In this season of Easter, the phoenix is a symbol of resurrection. Here is a 3rd century stone carving of a phoenix in the Catacombs of St. Callisto in Rome, one of the many places Lisa and I visited.

My favorite phoenix is Fawkes from the book, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. Harry meets Fawkes on his “burning day” and watches as he bursts into flames. Professor Dumbledore comes upon them and says, “The phoenix is a fascinating bird. It can carry immensely heavy loads and its tears have healing powers.” Then they watch together as Fawkes is reborn.

The phoenix represents life after death. It reminds us that though we are reduced to ashes sometimes, we can be reborn into something new.

To confront the ashes of our lives is to confront our suffering, our pain, our vulnerability. As the wonderful Buddhist teacher, Pema Chodron, reminds us, “When things fall apart and we’re on the verge of we know not what, the test for each of us is to stay on that brink and not concretize.”³

Often we want to go around our pain and I understand that because the way through the pain is always more difficult than the way around it.

I wasn’t planning on learning about Unitarian Universalism. I really thought my life trajectory was laid out before me and I was happy following it along. As I mentioned, I was raised a Southern Baptist, and while there are many things that I learned from that tradition, and that I appreciate, I had to eventually let it go because there was no place for me when I came out as a lesbian. In 1995, I was introduced to MCC, Metropolitan Community Churches, a Christian denomination that ministers primarily in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer communities. Because of MCC, I was able to reconcile my spirituality with my sexuality; they gave God back to me after others had tried so diligently to take God from me. My call to ministry, that I knew I had since I was eight years old, was reaffirmed by MCC and I will be forever grateful. Later I went to seminary at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, CA, and obtained my Master of Divinity Degree in 2002. Interestingly, one of my first classes was at Starr King School for the Ministry, the UU seminary. I was ordained to professional MCC ministry in May 2002 and since then I have served churches in Oklahoma, California, Georgia, and Tennessee. I also became a board-certified hospital chaplain along the way.

Lisa has been with me every step of the way, and on another note of interest, she was raised a UU. The very first MCC I served in Oklahoma City rented space from the Unitarian Church there. You can see that I had a lot of UU influences in my life.

Being in professional ministry has been one of the greatest joys of my life. My call took us to Decatur, Georgia, where I served a local church as senior pastor. After being there for only two and a half years, I resigned. I returned to my work as a hospital chaplain and decided, like the Episcopal Priest, the Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, that sometimes the only way you can keep

³ Pema Chodron, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*. Shambhala Classics, Boston, 2000, p 9.

your faith is to leave the church.⁴ When I left full-time church ministry, I was heart-broken and devastated. I wasn't sure I would ever pastor another church again and I wondered whether my career as a parish minister was over.

You know, it is absolutely true that ministers can hurt congregations terribly. This is why we must be held to incredibly high standards of ethical, moral, and spiritual behavior. But my friends, it is also true that congregations can hurt ministers. They can hurt Music Directors. Directors of Religious Education. Office Administrators. And each other. This is why practicing a Covenant of Right Relations is so very important. And it is some of the most challenging work of spiritual growth we will ever do. I learned recently that BUF has a Covenant of Right Relations and I reviewed documents from 2007 where this was discussed. Please forgive me for not knowing...since I am still rather new to this community I am not sure if the Covenant was ever finalized. If not, perhaps it is time to resurrect it. Even if it was it is always good to update our covenants and to remind ourselves of our agreements with one another. Our relationships with one another matter.

Heart-broken and devastated, Lisa and I washed up on the shores of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta in UUCA in the late fall of 2009. The first thing I saw when I entered the building was the phoenix, a beautiful piece of art hanging on the wall. We came into the service and their choir, known as "The Phoenix Choir" sang. Later the congregation sang, Woyaya—We will get there. Heaven knows how we will get there. But we know we will. All I could do was cry. I couldn't sing that song but I desperately wanted to believe it and so I listened as they sang it for me. And I remember thinking and saying to Lisa, "They have the phoenix as their spiritual symbol. Maybe this congregation knows what it means to rise from the ashes and to live again. Maybe we can rest here for a little while and find healing." UUCA became our refuge and I clung to the spiritual symbol of the phoenix.

Similar to how I entered here, I worshipped with them regularly for over a year before I "came out" to them as a minister. I am so grateful for the healing I experienced in that congregation. It was there that I began exploring Unitarian Universalism more fully and discovered that it really spoke to me. I also went on staff at UUCA as their Pastoral Care Coordinator. And it was there that I officially entered the process of becoming a fellowshipped minister with the UUA. The short story is that I became a "born-again UU"!

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I believe that healing is always possible but we do not heal by avoidance. We heal when we courageously face our pain and tell our stories.

In talking about pain Richard Rohr says this: "Spirituality in its best sense is about what you do with your pain... You can take it as a general rule that when you don't transform your pain, you transmit it."⁵ We all probably know people who transmit their pain to everyone around them

⁴ For more on this thought, refer to Barbara Brown Taylor, Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith.

⁵ Richard Rohr. Hope Against Darkness: The Transforming Vision of Saint Francis in an Age of Anxiety. St. Anthony Messenger Press, Cincinnati, p. 19.

instead of transforming it. We probably all know people whose personal identity is wrapped up in their pain and woundedness. I don't know about you but I would much rather be known by the healing I've experienced in my life rather than by my wounds.

It is said the tears of the phoenix have potent healing powers and capabilities. In Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, Harry has been mortally wounded in a fight with Tom Riddle, also known as Lord Voldemort, and in a really powerful scene, Fawkes who was reduced to ashes and born again, used his tears to heal the wounds of Harry Potter.

In doing this, Fawkes becomes the archetypal "wounded healer". It's a dynamic that psychologist Carl Jung described. He said that it is our own hurt that gives us a measure of our power to heal.

In his book, *The Wounded Healer*, author Henri Nouwen says it this way: "Nobody escapes being wounded. We all are wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The main question is not 'How can we hide our wounds?' so we don't have to be embarrassed, but 'How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?' When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers."⁶

In other words, our healed wounds can serve as a source of strength and healing to others. I know we have some Wounded Healers in this congregation; I have already met some of you and appreciate your source of strength and healing. It is my hope and prayer as your Community Minister that I can be the same for you.

Today, the phoenix has not been forgotten. It remains a symbol of triumph, beauty, hope and love.

As we continue on our spiritual journeys together, may we embrace the healing and transformation that is available to us. May we find ways to tell our stories. May we remember that though we may be reduced to ashes sometimes, just like the phoenix, we can be reborn into something new. Let it be so, blessed be and amen.

⁶ Henri J. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society*, Image Publishers, 1979.