

“The Chicken in the Egg”
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“Sometimes there’s nothing else to do and still survive.” Yesterday was the birthday of Annie Edson Taylor, who lived from 1838 to 1921. She was born and raised in Auburn, New York, where she met and married David Taylor. They had been married only seven years when he was killed in the Civil War. She was 24.

In those days, there weren’t many options for widows to support themselves. For almost 40 years, she struggled to make ends meet. At that point, she was desperate for money and decided that she would do anything to avoid the poorhouse. She had always been a bit of a daredevil. At the age of 63, she decided she would be the first person to ride over Niagara Falls. She’d be famous, and she figured, where there’s fame, there’s fortune.

She had a barrel custom made of oak and iron and padded with a mattress. Her launch was delayed because no one wanted to be part of a suicide. Finally, a cat was sent over to test the barrel; both cat and barrel survived. Two days later, several thousand people gathered to see Taylor perform her stunt. She climbed into the barrel. Friends screwed down the lid, compressed the air with a bicycle pump, plugged the hole with a cork and set her adrift to plunge over the 167-foot-high falls. At the bottom, rescuers reached her barrel promptly; she only had a small cut on her head.

Annie Edson Taylor briefly earned money speaking about her experience. But her manager embezzled her money and ran off with the barrel, and she spent most of her savings on private detectives to find it. During her final years, she earned a little money posing for photos with tourists at her souvenir stand, working as a clairvoyant, and providing magnetic therapeutic treatments to locals. Even so, Taylor lived in poverty until her death at 83.

When I heard this story yesterday, I thought: “Wow, to make a decision to do that, she must have been willing to die.” After living from one financial crisis to

another for decades, I guess she had hit a wall. Going to the poorhouse was everyone's nightmare, but for her, it was apparently not even an option. She needed to do something drastic. Something risky. She needed to change her life –for the better, she hoped –and she was willing to put her all into it. She was literally willing to risk her life.

Kind of like being up against the inside wall of an egg. You have to get out. You don't know what will happen. But, there's no other option. Scary stuff.

Psychologist Dr Donna DiMenna says, “everything changes. Change happens and we mark and celebrate the positive changes. But change is not transformation.”

Transformation is change of a higher order of magnitude. Ordinary change means you're still operating within your worldview. Annie Edson Taylor, as a 19th-century widow, may have tried many ways of improving her situation: taking in sewing and laundry, housekeeping, caring for children. But she was still a struggling widow. Her basic situation hadn't changed. She was still operating within the worldview of a widow and her limited options.

I think she saw her stunt as a way of creating a new identity for herself and a new life. A transformation from widow to celebrity, from “poor woman” to “a woman of means.” Sadly for her, she was still a widow– a woman alone taken advantage of by a shyster, and thus again a poor woman. There was no lasting transformation –at least not on the outside.

What might have been going on inside? It's hard to imagine shooting over the edge of Niagara Falls and surviving and NOT having it transform our image of ourselves. Did Annie experience an internal transformation?

In spite of the fact that to all appearances, life after her stunt wasn't substantially different than it had been before, Annie had all the ingredients of readiness for transformation. Years of discomfort and exhausting all her other options drove her to take a risk that could very well have ended in death.

I like to think that Annie was transformed on the inside. She became a person who did something outrageous –something no one else in the world had ever

done. Not only that, she survived! I think that must have changed the way she saw herself in some dramatic way.

I think most of us can think of a time when we felt like we were up against the wall, when we had to kick and scratch our way through, because there WAS no other way to go. Whatever the situation, we were so uncomfortable, so constrained, that we had to leave the world that was once our place of comfort, because was no longer working for us. We didn't know what was on the other side, but we felt compelled to get out.

Discomfort, dis-ease, desperation, despair –all these states that are the antithesis of feeling serene and at peace – it seems that we have to go through these painful states in order for transformation –that change of a higher magnitude – in order for real transformation to happen.

Transformation is what goes beyond the egg –the world we know. Like the chick, we have no idea what's on the other side, but we become so uncomfortable that we're willing to risk everything. Crying, stumbling and feeling exhausted, we have to peck our way out of there, even though it means destroying our little world.

There's a Greek word that stands for the transformation of heart, mind and character, and that's *metanoia*. Minister Karen Hering says that *metanoia* is the work of religion. She says, "It arises from our ancient human hunger for the transformative powers of love and community." For Unitarian Universalists, it's not only about seeking that transformation of mind, heart and character on a personal level. It's also about the long, slow bending of the universe toward peace and justice. It's about us as religious people, because we have a role to play in the bending, in the transformation.

Some of us may be tempted to give up, some days, when we see so much evidence of a world that seems to be transforming in the other direction. But let us not discount the power of community. Because whenever and wherever we gather in a community of faith, we are blessed by the presence of what our early religious forebears called "the visible saints." We are the saints –the ones who present to each other tangible evidence of the power of love and community to transform us individually and as a group.

And when we put our hearts and minds together, acting upon our faith, inside our walls or out beyond them, we are bending the universe toward peace and justice. Little by little, bit by bit, we are contributing to the positive transformation of the world.

This is our work. It is to transform hearts, minds and characters –in the world, in our congregation and in ourselves. It is to keep before us the wall of the eggshell. We cannot stay here. Little by little, day by day, transformation is happening.

Questions for discussion

If you succeeded in a stunt like Annie Edson Taylor, how do you think you would be changed?

What do you think it takes for the transformation of heart, mind and character?

Ruth MacKenzie believes that discomfort is necessary for there to be transformation. What do you think?

Does anyone have a personal story of transformation they'd like to share?