

“Easter: Everything Transforms”  
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April 16, 2017

Our next door neighbors have two young boys. The other day, the older one – he’s about nine – he called to my partner Gene and me, saying, “I want to show you something. Wait here; I’ll be right back.” He went into the house, and, a few moments later, he reappeared holding a small yellow fluffy something. When he held it out, we saw it was a duckling. I don’t know that much about ducklings, but it couldn’t have been more than a few days old.

He let each of us touch it, and then, I couldn’t resist. I asked him if I could hold it. He carefully transferred it to my hands. It was so precious. This tiny duck looked at me with one of its shiny black eyes. I marveled at those eyes, its miniature duck beak, its cold little duck feet. I gently stroked its incredibly soft, downy feathers with one finger.

And then I touched one of its tiny wings, hardly wings at all yet. And I realized that this little duckling is going to be changing day by day. This downy baby will soon be sprouting stiff adult feathers, and its stubs of wings will grow out to be long and strong.

I looked up how long it takes for a newborn duck to reach maturity. By September, it will be all grown up – a beautiful, shining white adult duck. Soon, it will reproduce, there will be more ducklings, and the cycle will continue.

The Easter season is a time of rebirth when hope can be seen in the wings of a newborn duckling. Spring is a time of renewal, when the gray of winter comes alive with sparkly newness. This is a time for rejoicing, when all of nature seems to celebrate the wonder of life itself.

And even though nature is changing all the time, it’s often at a slow pace, so that we may not even be able to perceive the transformation. But during this season, the changes are so rapid, so far and wide, and filled with such incredible beauty, that we humans can hardly NOT notice how everything is growing and changing.

It's almost as if the universe is saying to us, "Look! See how everything transforms!"

And if we do begin to look, we may start to see that transformation happens everywhere, all the time.

The Easter story is a story of transformation –of many transformations, really. Jesus goes from radical teacher who travels freely, spreading his message, to criminal status and being immobilized on the cross. He then passes from life to death. The tomb in which he is laid is closed, then it is open. His body is there, and then it's not there. And we note that the women who discover that Jesus is gone are afraid. We're reminded that when unexpected transformation is taking place, we often don't understand it in the moment and are fearful.

And then there are the stories of Jesus' transformation from a living human being to a spiritual being. And with his transforming, the early Christians believed, it made possible their own spiritual transformation. Those earliest Jewish Christians compared the Jesus story to the ancient account of Passover and the Israelites' escape from Egypt. As the story goes, God transformed the Red Sea from deep water to an open pathway, and so the Israelites underwent their own transformation from slavery to freedom. The two celebrations, Easter and Passover, were linked together because of their powerful messages of physical and spiritual transformation.

And what about us? How do we transform? Over the course of a life, how do we change, whether on purpose or not, and how do we emerge, the same and yet utterly transformed? As UU minister Victoria Safford observes, "We re-form, reform, we are about the work of reformation, all the time."

She continues,

James Hillman, the psychologist, writes about the acorn, the tiny nut, the kernel and the seed, which lives, though it breaks apart entirely when it germinates, the acorn persists, he says, in every aspect of the living oak, roots and branches, leaves and gnarly bark, the sap that runs, the ghost that lingers in the lumber of the table. He likens it to character, to the

soul, the original, unprecedented identity present in every atom of a tree which may be two hundred years old, changed, not changed.

A woman who was born in the late 1920s says, “I am the same person, the very same, as I was when I walked to school at age 6 on that dusty unpaved road in North Dakota with my lunch pail and my books in a strap in... You see a gnarled old wizened [person], but inside here I am no different! I am that child - though I have changed and changed and grown and will keep on changing and not changing till the end. By the force of my own will and my imagination, and by grace or luck or circumstance I have both stayed exactly the same and I have been mightily transformed, and I can trace the thread of the story, but I can’t quite explain it.” (Victoria Safford)

There is some core part of our being which abides, even as we recognize that we have grown and changed and perhaps reinvented ourselves entirely. Even as our elders insist they are still the same person, even as we can’t quite believe it, on another level, we do believe it, because we know it to be our own experience.

As we grow and change and mature, we actually become more ourselves, less bound by old hurts and naïve ways of approaching life. We begin to see that we are more alike than different. One thing that a religious community does is that it helps us to see that we are not isolated beings. Religious community brings us out of our isolated selves and out of our individualism. A religious community like this one, at its best, can transform us spiritually. That’s because our relationship with that which is larger than ourselves is transformed. We begin to have moments of recognition: recognition that we are an intrinsic part of the universe, of all that exists.

Our spiritual relationship with the all-that-is then transforms us. And like a little growing duckling, and all of nature, that relationship is continuously growing and changing. And, as we know, the spiritual life often ebbs and flows. But when we’re paying attention, we may be able to recognize that transformation is happening: we stop in the middle of having a reaction, and choose to say a kind word instead. Or perhaps we notice that we’re being nicer to ourselves, instead of beating ourselves up when we make a mistake. On our good days, at least, we can sometimes see that we’re becoming more generous and compassionate.

And when we're in a spiritual community, the community also transforms. Each of us is changed by our encounters with each other. In Victoria Safford's words, "We are touched by many hands -- and our own hands...touch other people, and shape the very world."

So we not only change each other within our community, but we are also moved to act beyond our own circles. Because when we embody the understanding of ourselves as part of a larger whole, we can't help but feel concern for the suffering of others.

We come here in part because we hope for experiences of transformation. That we will grow and change, and in so doing, become more ourselves. As we commit to and engage ourselves in a relationship with the spirit, however you may experience that, that relationship transforms our relationship with everything else.

And where do we encounter this relationship with the spirit? We may find it right here. We may find it in an encounter with another person. We may find it in meditation or prayer. And, we may find it in nature.

The early Unitarian and Universalist preacher, Thomas Starr King, believed that spending time in nature on a regular basis is an important way to re-affirm our relationship with the sacred, and thus, to transform our spirits. In an 1863 sermon entitled, "Lessons from the Sierra Nevada," he said,

I believe that if, on every Sunday morning before going to church, we could be lifted to a mountain-peak and see a horizon line of six hundred miles enfolding the copious splendor of the light on such a varied expanse; or if we could look upon a square mile of flowers representing all the species with which the Creative Spirit embroiders a zone...; if we could fairly perceive...one or two features of the constant order and glory of nature, our materialistic dullness would be broken, surprise and joy would be awakened, we should feel that we live amid the play of [the] Infinite... and the...spirit would be stimulated so potently that our hearts would naturally mount in praise and prayer.

We are not isolated beings. We are intimately connected with all of humanity, all of nature, every atom of the universe. As part of this infinitely vast and ever-changing cosmos, we are constantly growing and transforming. The journey is often not easy and the path is often unclear. At times it is frustrating and painful and at others it's inspiring and exhilarating.

But let us make this journey together. Let us inspire and encourage one another as we join together in this endeavor we call life. As we transform, so may our community transform. And through the strength of this community, may we do our part to transform the world around us with love and compassion. May it be so. Happy Easter.