

“Seeds of a New Self”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

March 10, 2024

The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.

One of the intentions behind my five-week trip to the Philippines this past December and January was to reconnect with familial roots and learn more about my ancestry and lineages. As someone separated from this personal history by thousands of miles, decades of assimilation, and intentional destruction of the written record of my ancestors' significant life events, I have lived with an underlying yearning for deeper connection to my roots for a long time.

My first attempt at piecing together a family tree came during seminary when we were tasked with creating a genogram to map our blood relations and the rituals, stories, secrets, and traditions that had been passed on over time. I continued to add to this family record. I filled in information gathered by one of my aunts on my mother's father's side who had done extensive research. And, I gathered more tidbits through informal conversations with family members at holiday gatherings and birthday parties over the years.

I knew that actually going to the place where my ancestors were born and schooled and married and raised children and finally were laid to rest would unearth more information than I could piece together through faded memories and Ancestry.com.

My parents had done some advanced work to arrange for a series of family gatherings on each of their sides. I found out that one of these gatherings was going to be a reunion on my father's side. The scope of the reunion wasn't clear to me until we drove up to the home of one of my father's cousins where the event would be taking place - and I saw multiple, large outdoor tents set up with more than a dozen round tables underneath and a large colorful display that said, "Javier Grand Reunion."

After a Catholic mass celebrated in the neighborhood church, we all walked back over for the party. Soon all the tables were filled, and I could see that there were nearly 200 people present. All descendants of my great-grandparents, Pedro Javier and Maria Cueto, who had ten children, one of them my father's father, Teofilo Cusi Javier.

We ate together. We played games led by an enthusiastic hostess. And we made what small talk we could across the language barrier with relatives we were meeting for the first time.

About an hour or so into the reunion, Jared came back from taking a walk with one of my uncles and said, “I have to show you something.” Liam and I went with him. We walked behind all the tents and farther onto the land. Jared pointed to an old, run-down structure made of bamboo beside a small field of grass where a few goats were grazing. “That’s where your great-grandparents lived.” We took in the sight of the home and then walked a bit farther down a dirt path where we could see tropical forests and mountain peaks in the distance.

On this land, I could feel something starting to grow in my soul. Connection. The sense of being found. The start of something transformative.

Our worship theme this month is “The Gift of Transformation.” Transformation speaks to the ways that our lives are constantly in flux. Indeed, life is a process of constant change. From the micro changes happening within our bodies every moment as old cells die and new cells are formed. To the macro changes that take place both around us in our environment as seasons change and roads turn to mud and are covered in snow once again, as well as within our own lives as we face losses and enter times of transition.

Change is constant. Our life circumstances change as we lose people we love, end relationships, change jobs, move back home, move out on our own, have children, start new hobbies...Some of the changes in our lives are things we choose, and others simply happen to us.

Change is a part of, but also distinct from, transformation. A colleague of mine, the Rev. Barbara Prose, puts it this way: “Change is about what we do, and transformation is about who we are.” We can often witness change happening in obvious ways while transformation often takes place below the surface where what is taking new shape isn’t always apparent.

The kind of journey of transformation I believe we are on as spiritual beings is about responding to life’s continuous changes as we are remade on the inside. We are all on this journey. Consciously or unconsciously. Willingly or unwillingly.

We might think that a journey of transformation implies that we become someone completely different from who we are. A textbook definition of transformation might support this idea. The dictionary on my computer desktop defines transformation as “a thorough or dramatic change in form or appearance.” Like going from bare hillsides to snow-laden treetops overnight.

But, in a spiritual sense, I think the word “transformation” takes on another meaning.

Another colleague, the Rev. Marlin Lavanhar says that “the paradox of transformation” is that transformation is about becoming more fully who we are, rather than becoming something different. It means discovering a deeper truth about ourselves and finding a way to live into that truth and finding a sense of wholeness in the process.

I think we are all continuously growing more fully into who we are. Part of the process is self-discovery. Getting to know what our gifts are and how we are called to use them. And in our spiritual maturation we utilize those gifts in concert with our deepest yearnings and what the world needs. Spiritual transformation comes about as we live into the wholeness of who we are at our core.

The signs that transformation is underway can be subtle. Transformation can start with a seed being planted in our soul that lies in wait for the right conditions for it to emerge, sprout, and grow.

Standing upon the land on which my great-grandparents had once raised their children and tended to their farm, I could feel this kind of transformation beginning to take seed. The yearning for rootedness being answered and opening to something more.

Have you ever felt the seed of transformation being planted in your soul?

In that moment at that family reunion, the seed of transformation felt like an opening, an invitation. At other times, the seed was barely perceptible like the subtle shifting of the air rustling the leaves of a tree quietly heralding some greater change about to take place. And still, at other times in my life, the seed of transformation has felt like a rupture, like something breaking open.

Attuning ourselves to these shifts in who we are becoming is a part of the spiritual journey. You might be able to perceive these shifts in the moment, or at other times it is only in looking back that we can see the trail of bread crumbs left for us, clues that you were already on the path of becoming your whole self.

The shifts can be an affirmation telling you yes, keep going in this direction, or they might be the sign that it's time to change course.

The seed can be the giddiness you feel when reading about a new art class being offered as something in you awakens to possibility.

Maybe it's the churning of your stomach when you're about to start a project that you feel you should do but you're actually not all that excited about.

The seed can be tears of joy as you finally speak the truth that you've kept locked away in a silent chamber of the heart but now have the words to express.

If we listen closely, our spirits are telling us when we are in the midst of transforming toward wholeness.

The process of transformation isn't always smooth and easy. We can often face obstacles and painful growth as we begin to live more fully into the truth of who we are and move towards a fuller sense of wholeness.

Environmentalism and public speaker Heather Warman says, "For a seed to achieve its greatest expression, it must come completely undone. The shell cracks, its insides come out and everything changes."

Spiritual transformation can involve becoming undone, letting go, and shedding old forms of who we were or thought ourselves to be. Transformation sometimes uproots and disrupts rather than settles and soothes. This kind of disturbance can be scary and filled with uncertainty.

Yet, when we ignore these signs and let the seeds go untended we are more likely to miss out on the possibility of living more fully, of truly coming alive to this precious life.

I believe that there is something sacred inside of us and beyond us that calls to us to be more truly and fully ourselves. There is a yearning for wholeness like a howling of the soul and we can answer back.

Today is Harriet Tubman Day. Tubman died on March 10, 1913 at the age of 91. Harriet Tubman's heroic actions transformed the lives of those she shepherded out of slavery as well as the abolition movement and freedom movements that followed.

From her earliest days, Tubman experienced and witnessed cruelty dealt by human hands but something in her told her she could be free. After years of leading people on the Underground Railroad from the south to the north and then serving the Union army as a nurse and a scout, she became a champion for the women's suffrage movement. Freedom was her call, and she pursued it for herself and others heroically.

At the end of her life in her old age, Harriet Tubman desired rest and care. She returned to her home in Auburn, New York, and purchased 25 acres of land next to her property with a vision of creating a home for the aged and needy. She then sold the land to the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church which supported her in opening the Harriet Tubman Home for Aged and Indigent Negroes. It operated from 1908 into the early 1920s and was where Tubman died in 1913 at the age of 91.

After all those years of following her soul's deep yearning and working for freedom and the right to be treated with dignity, she was able to rest surrounded in care.

Imagine if we all were able to live into the wholeness of who we are at our core. Imagine if we could sense the seed of transformation and be able to nurture the life sprouting from it. What a world it would be.

Like the seed of transformation planted in me on a dirt path my ancestors once walked, like the seed of a freer self planted in those who have made a new way forward, may the seed of transformation lead you into greater connection, belonging, and wholeness.

So may it be.