

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Born and Reborn

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White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

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READING: The Layers *Stanley Kunitz*

I have walked through many lives,
some of them my own,
and I am not who I was,
though some principle of being
abides, from which I struggle
not to stray.

When I look behind,
as I am compelled to look
before I can gather strength
to proceed on my journey,
I see the milestones dwindling
toward the horizon
and the slow fires trailing
from the abandoned camp-sites,
over which scavenger angels
wheel on heavy wings.

Oh, I have made myself a tribe
out of my true affections,
and my tribe is scattered!
How shall the heart be reconciled
to its feast of losses?

In a rising wind
the manic dust of my friends,
those who fell along the way,
bitterly stings my face.

Yet I turn, I turn,
exulting somewhat,
with my will intact to go
wherever I need to go,
and every stone on the road
precious to me.

In my darkest night,
when the moon was covered
and I roamed through wreckage,
a nimbus-clouded voice
directed me:

“Live in the layers,
not on the litter.”

Though I lack the art
to decipher it,
no doubt the next chapter
in my book of transformations
is already written.

I am not done with my changes.

Born and Reborn

There is a spiritual practice in some mystical traditions called *lectio divina*, in which you hear a poem once (or a paragraph, a short chapter or verse), and then you breathe or rest or quietly sit, or listen to music that washes over you like running water, clear and true, and then the words are read aloud again, and you let them rain down on your spirit, on your other ear, in a different pattern, a different resonating tone. Often the text is printed on a page, so whatever the poet or the psalmist was trying to say, in clumsy words, enters you through many pores. That is an old practice, *lectio divina*, “divine reading.” Some pieces lend themselves more to this practice than others. I’m going to read again “The Layers,” by Stanley Kunitz:

I have walked through many lives, some of them my own, and I am not who I was, though some principle of being abides, from which I struggle not to stray.

When I look behind, as I am compelled to look before I can gather strength to proceed on my journey, I see the milestones dwindling toward the horizon and the slow fires trailing from the abandoned camp-sites, over which scavenger angels wheel on heavy wings.

[He is looking back over his long life.]

Oh, I have made myself a tribe out of my true affections, and my tribe is scattered!

[He is 90 years old!]

How shall the heart be reconciled to its feast of losses? In a rising wind the manic dust of my friends, those who fell along the way, bitterly stings my face.

Yet I turn, I turn, exulting somewhat, with my will intact to go wherever I need to go, and every stone on the road precious to me.

In my darkest night, when the moon was covered and I roamed through wreckage, a nimbus-clouded voice directed me: “Live in the layers, not on the litter.”

[Live deeply. Remember deeply back, through all the layers, all the chapters of your story, not just this present situation. Live in the layers of time, not on the surface of now.]

Though I lack the art to decipher it, no doubt the next chapter in my book of transformations is already written. I am not done with my changes.

Think of that, the implications of that. You are still unfolding. Tired as you are, sometimes, desperate, bored – you are still unfolding. Maybe you are confident and fixed in your opinions, stable and secure – even so, your chapters in the book of life are still being written. Whether you’re blissfully happy or no stranger to sorrow, no matter what, at any age, your changes aren’t all done.

In our house for almost 20 years there has been a living presence in the deep, dark back of our refrigerator. I know that sounds a little gross and a little scary. We've changed fridges several times, Ross and I, moved half-way across the country, and through it all – through power outages, and fits of cleaning and defrosting, through it all – the sourdough starter has been with us. It is a hard, grey lump of bread dough, smaller than a tennis ball, non-descript, a little ugly, and very much alive. It's old. This sourdough starter was given to Ross by a master baker who had it for years and broke off a piece for Ross to use and maintain; and that baker had it from another baker who received it from a colleague who had brought it years ago from France in the pocket of his coat (this is the days when you could fly on airplanes with living things in your pockets) and some years later *that* guy put a piece of it in a plastic bag and put that bag in a different pocket of a different coat and gave it to the baker who gave it to the baker who gave it to Ross – and this was all done at the opera, or so the story goes. Many, many years ago, one baker shared it with another during intermission, or maybe during some splendid aria, this strange, surreptitious transaction... who knows? Actually the opera may have been a concert, and one of the bakers may have been married to a violinist; the story has changed as much over time as the sourdough starter itself. Now a fragment of that same dramatic substance lives and breathes in our kitchen. Many hands have touched it, in Minnesota, in Wisconsin (where Ross bakes sometimes at an outdoor community oven that is more than 100 years old), in Vermont, in Maine and Massachusetts, in New York, in France; many hands have worked that dough, dividing it. Last summer when we had our gutters cleaned, Ross got to talking (as he does) with the woman holding the ladder for the guy on the roof. They were talking about baking and they got so excited that they left the guy up there for a while so Ross could go inside and get the starter to show the woman what it is and how it works, how from time to time you have to feed it with water and rye flour, and how you must take care, every time you bake, to save a piece of the sour and not use it up. You save some out and nurture it, squirrel it away, and it will live and grow for years.

It sits in the dark, quietly, pondering its purpose, which is a delightful purpose: to join with flour, water, salt and patience and imagination, transforming the most ordinary, ancient elements into crusty, fragrant, necessary bread, which we then eat, and our friends eat, and their friends whom we haven't met, and it transforms all of us into muscle and bone, into energy and more imagination; the bread becomes love and work and music, life itself, and so it goes and so it goes. We have no idea how many times that starter been divided and its divisions divided, nor how many people on at least two continents have eaten bread made from this same living thing. It is a most beautiful tangible mystery, this lump that lives and changes and does not change and changes us.

I have walked through many lives, some of them my own, and I am not who I was, though some principle of being abides, from which I struggle not to stray.

So sings the dough in the dark. Our theme this month is transformation: the practice of imagination. Over the course of a life, which, within one person, can be many lives lived in succession or overlapping, how do we change, on purpose or not on purpose; change, weather change, survive it and emerge just the same, totally unscathed and utterly transformed? We are touched by many hands and our own hands and dreams touch other people, shape the very world.

We re-form, reform, we are about the work of reformation, all the time. 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 that 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.

How many elders have you known who tell you - they tell us - they insist, while we smile and nod, indulging them, because we can't quite believe it (except we do, because it is our own experience):

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 1935. You see a gnarled old wizened oak, 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. "Some principle of being abides, from which I struggle not to stray," even as I've striven at certain times, to reinvent myself entirely – and I have succeeded.

I've met many people who have told me this.

Scientists tell us all our cells are sloughing off as new ones regenerate so that no part of our physical body is actually the same as it was even five or seven years ago. They also tell us- those who study science, instead of theology - they tell us that nothing is lost in this world, that matter and energy never go away. There's nowhere for them to go. It's the same stuff, round and round. There's theology in that, somewhere.

An ancient poet recognized this, and he wrote (or she):

*A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.
The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises.
The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.
All streams run to the sea....
What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done,
and there is nothing new under the sun.*

More recently another one could answer, *We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.*

And this is true, but Stanley Kunitz wonders, and we wonder with him, *How shall the heart be reconciled to its feast of losses? In a rising wind, the dust of my friends, those who fell along the*

way, bitterly stings my face. Yet I turn, I turn, exulting, with my will intact to go wherever I need to go. I am not done with my changes.

What changes in us and among us, and what doesn't?

Think of the make-overs, the metamorphoses you yourself have witnessed, in the mirror or in other people - people who live with addiction, for example, in themselves and those they love, alcoholics, addicts. They know that sobriety is not a one-time proposition, wherein you decide to get sober and then do. It begins, often, with an idea, an image, the dream of health, the glimpse of a whisper of a different kind of life. You lean toward it, and then one day you leap toward it, free-fall. You make that decision, fateful, terrifying decision, **and then you have to make it again**. Several times, several dozen times, a hundred times in a day, especially at first. You turn and turn and turn again, and you fall down and you turn again, You are utterly transformed and still you are the same. Your life is transformed, yet you still get up in the morning and go to your meeting and speak your name and tell them all, "I am an alcoholic." You have been transformed by the power of your will and by the grace of god or whatever higher power, other power, you acknowledge. You have been transformed by the grace of genetic accident and luck, and also perseverance and hard work, determination, dreams and grit, and if you're fortunate, by the support of those who love you and believe in you. Many hands have touched you, fed you, held you through the storm. You are utterly transformed, and then the next day and every day for the rest of your life you are transformed again because you are also just the same. You're born and reborn again and again, to new life which is the same life, only entirely, wholly, unrecognizably different.

I think religious conversations can be like this. Not always – sometimes apparently there are bursts of light that knock you to the ground and when you stagger up again you are a whole new creature. But more often, at least around here, I think it's more like evolution. You become more and more deeply yourself, your true self. You catch the glimpse of a whisper of the vaguest understanding of whom you're called to be, whom you're meant to be, or wish to be, and you lean toward that, you work toward that, you practice that religion. Sometimes you take a mighty step, a leap of faith and join a congregation. People say here all the time, "I was a Unitarian Universalist without knowing it, without even knowing *about* it, and this is completely different from what I knew before, I am different from what I was before," except you bring your whole self with you, your whole story, with you, all the layers. You bring your memories of the past and also of the future. You become more and more fully yourself. You remember who you are.

I want to bring in the voice of one more poet. She tells, in two pieces side by side, a story of memory and mighty change, tells how remembering the many layers not only of one's own history, but our shared history can lead to imagining the future, one's own new chapters and our whole shared story. Angela Shannon teaches English at Bethel University; she's one of three Minnesota writers who will be here in a couple of weeks, for an evening of poetry and music; she's an astonishing African American artist. Her two poems go back-to-back, catching different threads of the same story, more than a hundred years apart. In the first, there's a young girl, sitting in a field before the Civil War, writing to her Mama about her dreams of freedom, and

how one day everything is going to change. She can feel it; she can taste it, see it. And she writes it down. In the second poem, a woman in our time walks in a field, and meets some people there, in her mind's eye, who reveal to her their future and her own.

Here the congregation heard two poems from Angela Shannon:
 “Scattering Dreams,” and “Emancipation,”
 both from her book, *Singing the Bones Together*.

A girl sits in a meadow long ago, scattering dreams of freedom written on small scraps. She is conjuring the future – where we all sit right now. Somewhere she glimpsed the glimmer of a whisper of a powerful idea, and understood that if she chased it down, leapt toward it, trailing all the layers of the past behind her, everything, including her, could be born again. She remembered, as we all must do, at certain times, a future she had not yet seen, and she ran toward it, thus bringing it about. This is how change happens. You run toward it.

Fast forward to now. A woman walks in a meadow in her T-shirt and her running shoes, remembering a past she never knew, not personally, a transformation long ago that made her own life possible. Through *the empathy of memory*, she sees them, hears them running, her ancestors who once were slaves in chains and ran away. In her mind she sees a girl she's never seen, holding scraps of paper speaking freedom – and she wonders, there, surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, what her own future might demand. “I wonder what keeps this world awake, what so badly needs to be spoken,” and like the girl before her, she starts remembering a future she has not yet clearly seen – none of us has – but we are walking toward it. This is how change happens. We imagine who we're called to be, looking backward through the layers, squinting forward in the dark, through the empathy of memory. Many lives, many hands, form us and reform us. We inspire one another, imagine health in one another, instigate in one another transformations no one could predict, and then, by grace and by our will, turning, learning, falling, growing, we stand where we are now, looking back – amazed - at where we've come from, where we've travelled, how we've changed. We stand where we are now, having been born and many times re-born, with gratitude for everything that changes - and thankful, also, for the kernel, acorn, the core, the spark within, the spirit, the lump of soul – the self - that stays the same.