

The Necessity of Discomfort



BY RUTH MACKENZIE, MINISTER OF WORSHIP ARTS,
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Recently, in preparation for my daily practice of mindfulness and prayer, I came across a stunning piece of information. In *The Book of Awakening: Having the Life You Want to Have by Being Present to the Life You Have*, by the poet Mark Nepo, I learned that a baby chick doesn't just hatch. Well, it does hatch, but the process of hatching is actually a terrifying event if you look at it from the bird's perspective.

In the moments before birth the small hatchling has eaten all its food, and its growing body presses against every contour and curve of the shell. There is no more room. There is no more food. The chick hatches because its body is painfully cramped inside the world of the egg, and it is starving.

There is so much discomfort that the chick is driven to peck its way into whatever is on the other side of the world, whatever is on the other side of safety, because there is nothing else to do and still survive. The world literally breaks apart. The chick eats bits of its own shell, and its body squeezes through the emerging cracks.

Hatching is not graceful. There is wrestling and rolling around. There is crying and prying. There is exhaustion, and power naps. There is stumbling and trying to hold the head up while getting feet underneath the body. Hatching is not graceful. It is beautiful to behold, but I daresay the chick would not describe it that way. I think the chick would say: hatching is necessity. As Mark Nepo writes: "Once everything it has relied on falls away, the chick is born. It doesn't die, but falls into the world."

I think most of us can name a time when where we were, what we were doing, how we were being, was so uncomfortable, so constraining, that there was nothing to be done but peck a way into whatever was on the other side of the egg we have relied on, whatever was on the other side of safety, because there was no other way we were going to survive. It might have felt like death, but instead, each of us fell into a new world. Whether we like it or not, discomfort—feeling cramped, feeling soul-hungry—is the seed of transformation.

My psychologist friend Dr. Donna DiMenna says, "Everything changes. Change...change...change, yes change happens and we celebrate and mark this fact of living, as well we should. But change is not transformation." Change, she says, is an occurrence that happens in the context of our own worldview, our eggshell, if you will.

Transformation, however, is change that extends beyond the boundaries of our worldview. There is no way the hatchling can imagine what is on the other side of the egg. It is discomfort that drives the chick to risk everything, to go beyond its worldview. This is transformation.

So let me give you a couple of examples of what I mean.

I have fond memories of visiting my uncle's farm in Nebraska when I was younger. It was paradise. I loved my cousins. I loved the farm. Looking back, it was a time when I felt absolutely free and absolutely loved.

But as the years wore on and life began to shape us all, I realized that I had stopped connecting with my relatives. There was this growing divide between us, as wide as the canyon by the farm where we used to play as kids. My uncle, aunt

You cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad.

—C.S. Lewis

A monthly for religious liberals

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and cousins belonged to a very conservative Christian church. I remember being surprised by some of the things they would say about God, about non-believers, about people of color, about homosexuals. What they said didn't seem to match up with this big experience of love I felt. I couldn't deal with the cognitive dissonance as a kid, so I set it aside.

Then as fate would have it, I became involved with my partner. I stayed as far away from the subject of my own family as I possibly could. I attended funerals and weddings without my partner, Rebecca, knowing it would be too uncomfortable. And then, finally, I just stopped going altogether.

In the wake of Michael Brown's shooting and subsequent protests in Ferguson, Missouri, I can't help but think of my new understanding of hatching.

That egg was getting mighty uncomfortable. My spirit was painfully cramped inside the shell of ideas about family and religion, narratives about who is normal and who is not, and I was starving. I was starving for the love I once felt and that deep sense of family. I was starving to have my full humanity, my whole and holy self.

There was nothing else to do but what I did. I decided it was time to connect. I invited my whole family to a concert I was singing in. My cousins arrived in Omaha with their kids, and my aunt in tow. They listened to the concert, beaming the whole way through. I was glad I was singing, because I knew everything we had relied on up to that point for family connection—my silence, my acquiescence to definitions of family, to what is “normal,” under-

standings of religion—all of it would soon break apart...and we would fall into another world. I couldn't guess what was on the other side. All I knew was that the current world was coming to an end.

Now, I wasn't stupid. I knew who I needed to talk to first. I wasn't going to make a big announcement at the dinner table. I wanted to take my cousin Debbie off to the side, and speak with her alone. My cousins and aunt drove me to my hotel and when I stepped out of the car, and my cousin Debbie asked: “Do you need help with your luggage?” “Yes,” I said. “Yes, I definitely need help.” (I had one bag.)

I knew it was now or never. With the engine idling and my aunt and cousins in the car nearby, I said something like:

“Look, I've been trying to tell you something all night, but I haven't had the chance. I wish I could do this differently, but this is what I've got to do, right here, right now. I am partnered with...uh... I mean, I am living with... Let me start over. I am, like, married to a woman. We've been together for a really long time. I know this may not agree with your religious views, but I'm hoping to be reconnected with you and with the family, and I don't know how to do that without telling you about who I really am.”

The evening could have gone a thousand different ways; I'd heard plenty of stories. But grace intervened that night. Debbie took my hand and smiled with such tenderness. “I don't care. I love you.... What's your partner's name?”

When you watch a chick being hatched there seems to be this one pivotal break that allows the rest of the process to transpire. There's a lot of rolling around with the egg still attached to the chick. There's a lot of flopping around, trying to hold its head up, trying to comprehend wings outstretched instead of wings closed around the torso.

So much of this was true for me and my family. There was and still is plenty

of flopping around, shells of religious doctrine and narratives about what is “normal” half attached to our bodies, to our conversations. But the real transformation in all this is not me coming out. That was just the pivotal crack.

The real transformation is a shift in our family culture. It has something to do with bringing our full humanity, our whole and holy selves to one another. Concepts of family, and of what it is to be together, are shifting. My cousin's kids want to gather with me and my sisters whenever we come down to Nebraska, because they sense that something real and authentic is happening. We see each other.

In the wake of Michael Brown's shooting and subsequent protests in Ferguson, Missouri, I can't help but think of my new understanding of hatching.

This egg we're all living in is getting mighty tight: this egg of racism and white privilege, this social construct that was made up centuries ago and that we are living out to devastating effect today. The construct, the egg, says white skin, white ways of looking at things, white ways of doing things are normal, are fully human. Other expressions of skin tone, culture, and ways of viewing the world are somehow a little less, justifying all manner and forms of inequity.

As I heard so powerfully at a vigil for Michael Brown and other dark skinned youth who have recently lost their lives: “Racism is not the stupid remark your great uncle makes and causes everyone to squirm around the dinner table.” “Racism is the air we breathe,” as Dr. Heather Hackman puts it. It is a construct in which we all live, that weaves its way through economics, policing, education, and everyday life, like walking down the middle of the street one afternoon, and ending up being shot to death.

Or in north Minneapolis, recently, when a young black woman crossing the street *in the crosswalk* to attend that same vigil was startled by a cop car

that had to slow down for her, as they tried to respond to a 911 call. The young woman didn't even understand what she had done when six police cars pulled up after the vigil and bundled her into the back seat of the squad car, detaining and ticketing her for obstruction. I have to ask myself, "Would this have happened in my neighborhood or if that young woman looked like me, a middle-aged white woman?" I don't think so.

Friends, we are all in this egg, this racialized egg. We didn't construct it. We're just in it together, some to life-stressing, life-threatening disadvantage, and others to life-enhancing advantage. But regardless of where we are positioned in the egg, we are all starving.

Changes or adjustments *inside* the worldview of the egg are not enough. There is so much needless death, so much dissonance, so much disorder and disarray, so much discomfort that we are being driven to peck our way into whatever is on the other side of the world, because there is nothing else to do and still survive.

Transformation is what we are longing for: change that is beyond our worldview, beyond the walls of the egg. This pecking and prying, this wrestling and rolling around—this is what's necessary.

This is what it means to live into our principles of inherent worth and dignity of every person, what it means to work for justice, equity and compassion in human relations. This is what it means to live into *shalom*, a peace that is born out of right relationship to one another, to ourselves, and to the great and moving spirit of good and grace that I sometimes call God.

Friends, there is no more room. But take heart. Trust the discomfort. Trust the anger. Trust the tenderness. It is all a part of hatching. It is all a piece of transformation.

May we peck and pry until we are born whole and holy in the new world. ■

Transformation vs. Acceptance



BY DOUGLAS TAYLOR,
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Transformation is part and parcel of most religious groups. The work of a faith community is to build a better world and to help each other become better people, to be open to the grace of God in our lives.

But it is right around here that I start to stumble a bit. I am a big fan of grace. I talk about grace a lot. I don't insist that we all see it as "the grace of God," but I do call us to see grace as a power that can bring out the best in us and help us through the hard times. That's not the part that makes me stumble. What gives me pause is when the full meaning of that word *transformation* finally catches up with me.

Let me give you an example. During one of my first years with my congregation I was struggling to imagine what to say on a Stewardship Sunday. I'd figured out I couldn't just talk about money—I knew that much already. So I was looking for an angle to speak about how important the congregation is to its people. I wanted to hear about what this place means. So I started asking for stories of transformation: "How has this congregation transformed you?" And you know what? That question really didn't get us anywhere.

I found person after person saying, "I don't know that I've been transformed here, I don't think that's the right word." People would talk about how the community helped them live out their values, encouraged them to be better people, gave them support in justice issues they cared about or just support to get through another week in

their hectic lives. One person finally hit the nail on the head for me when she pulled me aside and said, "No I don't feel transformed by this congregation. What I feel is accepted, and that makes all the difference."

And I knew that. But I get hooked by the shiny side of transformation. I get caught by the thought that our community can build a better world, that it does change lives and truly makes a difference for people. But all of that can happen without it needing to be transformation. I know that. Because when I sit back and really think about it, transformation is major stuff. It's about a complete overhaul.

Transformation is akin to conversion and revolution, not just losing 10 pounds and getting involved at the Islamic Center. It is not about steps toward self-improvement with plans to be more patient or more generous or more involved. Transformation is the whole deal, total metamorphosis: caterpillar to butterfly, man to beast, solid to liquid. When you are transformed you are a whole new person. That's not something to step into lightly. I know all that. (And I give credit to my colleague Jane Rzepka, who spoke on transformation at a UU ministers' convocation, informing my comments on the subject.)

But here's the thing: I pretty much like the folks of my congregation, and the folks of our larger UU circle—just as they are.

I like who you are, and how you look. I like who you love; I like how you care about justice; I like the way you respond to the movement of the spirit when we gather. I like that you have a theology that is your own; I like that you have your unique spiritual practices. I like your quirks and foibles and occasionally challenging mannerisms. You are wonderful and interesting people and dear to me just the way you are. If we were to each go through a transformation today I'm not so sure I would like the result.

My theology calls me to meet you where you are; it calls me to promote you being who you are without the need to become something or someone else. Sure, I want to be a better person—we all want to be better people. But transformed? Blasted off the horse and left blind for days, turned into a whole new person? Really transformed? I don't think that is something to be wished for.

This isn't just a matter of semantics. There is a deep theology at the ground of this question. Either we accept you as you are or we are in the business of helping transform you into something else. We can't play both sides with integrity.

Unitarian Universalism has a rather clear answer to that, and it's not the old-school Calvinist doctrine of human depravity and original sin. We affirm every person's inherent dignity, inherent worth—which is already there. The church doesn't need to cleanse you or bless you or give you something to make you whole. It is inherent. You do not need to become something more or better to be welcomed here.

As Mary Oliver says in her poem "Wild Geese," "You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting." As Dick Gilbert says in our hymnal (reading #442): "Whoever you are, whatever you are, wherever you are on your journey, we bid you welcome." Our theology says you need not be transformed first. Come as you are and be blessed.

Two of my favorite stories about our 19th century forebear Hosea Ballou make this point through his Universalist theology. The first is something of a parable. He responded with this image when someone questioned his Universalist beliefs:

Your child has fallen into the mire, and her body and her garments are defiled. You cleanse her, and array her in clean robes. The query is: Do you love

your child because you have washed her? Or did you wash her because you love her?

And another story comes as he was visiting a member of the town and saw her sweeping the kitchen floor. He asked: *Did you require someone to sweep the floor clean before you would sweep it, good woman?* You can imagine her response: *What a ridiculous question, of course not.* Ballou's point was: *So it is with God. You need not have already been cleansed before God will accept you and make you clean.*

Maybe the call to transformation is a call to continue to grow, not because who you are now is not good enough, but rather because who you yet can be is still more amazing!

Our theology says you need not be transformed first. Come as you are and be blessed. Yet it must be some foible of my own that keeps me looking to that shiny idea of transformation. I am drawn to stories of how people have overcome despair and struggle to come out the other side. But when I relax I can see the truth of it. We are a place of acceptance, and that in itself is powerful and rare and allows us to be an amazing community of grace in our own unique and authentic style.

Being accepted is major stuff. And as Carl Rogers says: "It wasn't until I accepted myself just as I was in this moment, that I was free to change." A pre-condition to true transformation, then, is to accept ourselves in the moment.

So maybe one way Unitarian Universalism can find an authentic way into the idea of transformation is to start

with acceptance. Maybe we can hear the call for transformation *not* as a hint that we are somehow not good enough as we are, that we are flawed and unacceptable as we begin.

Maybe, instead, we can hear it the way a Zen Buddhist master once put it: "You are perfect just the way you are...and you could use some improvement." You are acceptable, even perfect. You are who you are and it is beautiful. But don't stop! Keep growing, keep improving, keep getting better.

Maybe the call to transformation is a call to continue to grow, not because who you are now is not good enough, but rather because who you yet can be is still more amazing! It is not static. Nothing is. Change is a constant, and what is transformation but the most extreme form of change? But change in itself is not good or bad; it just is.

Consider the song we sing from our hymnal (#188) with words by Rumi: "Come, come, whoever you are, wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving. Ours is no caravan of despair. Come, yet again, come." It doesn't say: *Welcome to the place where we sit down at the end.* It says: *Welcome to the journey, welcome into the caravan. Let's move.*

Perhaps our work in Unitarian Universalism is not to help anyone transform, but to get us through a transformation should one arrive. Our call may be to help build up community support and strength of spirit to sustain us through a transformation should we find ourselves in one.

Our work here is acceptance first. And in accepting, may we provide the resources for each of us to also be more accepting of each other, and of the unfolding of life. As we create this community of support and acceptance, may we also build the capacity for each of us to weather our storms, and be transformed. ■

The Stream: A Sufi Story

A stream, from its course in the far-off mountains, passing through every kind and description of countryside, at last reached the sands of the desert. Just as it had crossed every other barrier, the stream tried to cross this one, but found that as fast as it ran into the sand, its waters disappeared.

It was convinced, however, that its destiny was to cross this desert, and yet there was no way. Now a hidden voice, coming from the desert itself, whispered: "The wind crosses the desert, and so can the stream."

The stream objected that the wind could fly, and this was why it could cross a desert.

"By hurtling in your own accustomed way you cannot get across. You will either disappear or become a marsh. You must allow the wind to carry you over to your destination."

But how could this happen?

"By allowing yourself to be absorbed in the wind."

This idea was not acceptable to the stream. After all, it had never been absorbed before. It did not want to lose its individuality. And, once having lost it, how was one to know that one's identity could ever be regained?

"The wind," said the sand, "performs this function. It takes up water, carries it over the desert, and then lets it fall again."

"How can I know that this is true?"

"It is so, and if you do not believe it, you cannot become more than a quagmire."

"But can I not remain the same stream that I am today?"

"You cannot in either case remain so," the whisper said. When it heard this, echoes began to arise in the thoughts of the stream. Dimly it remembered a state in which it—or some part of it?—had been held in the arms of a wind. And the stream raised its vapor into the welcoming arms of the wind, which gently and easily bore it upwards and along, letting it fall softly as rain once they reached the roof of a mountain, many, many miles away, where it then became a river. ■

These are the Times that Grow Our Souls



(Excerpt)

BY GRACE LEE BOGGS

The America that is best known and most resented around the world pursues unlimited economic growth, technological revolutions, and consumption, with little or no regard for their destructive impact on communities, on the environment, and on the billions of people who live in what used to be called the "Third World."

On the other hand, there is little or no national or international recognition of the movement to "grow our souls," which began emerging organically in the United States after the dropping of the atom bomb....

At the time Einstein summed up most succinctly the urgent need for this redefinition of what it means to be a human being. "Technological progress," he warned, "is like an axe in the hands of a pathological criminal. The release of atom power has changed everything but the human mind and thus we drift towards catastrophe. The solution to the problem lies in the heart of man-

kind. Imagination is more important than knowledge."

"A human being" he said, "experiences himself, his thoughts, and feelings as something separated from the rest... a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."

The nuclear bomb created a great divide in theories and strategies for social change. Henceforth, human beings could no longer pretend that everything that happened to us was determined by external or economic circumstances. Freedom now included the responsibility for making choices. Radical social change could no longer be viewed simply in terms of us vs. them, of victims vs. villains, of good vs. evil or of transferring power from the top to the bottom. We could no longer afford a separation between politics and ethics. Consciousness and self-consciousness, ideas and values, mere "superstructure" in the Marxist-Leninist paradigm, had to become inte-

gral, both as end and as means, to social struggle. Radical social change had to be viewed as a **two-sided transformational process**, of ourselves and of our institutions, a process requiring protracted struggle and not just a D-Day replacement of one set of rulers with another.

The 1955–56 Montgomery Bus Boycott was the first struggle by an oppressed people in Western society from this new philosophical/political perspective. Before the eyes of the whole world, a people who had been treated as less than human struggled against their dehumanization not as angry victims or rebels but as new men and women, representative of a new, more human society. Practicing methods of nonviolence that transformed themselves and increased the good rather than the evil in the world, always bearing in mind that their goal was not only desegregating the buses but creating the beloved community, they inspired the human identity and ecological movements which over the last 40 years have been creating a new civil society in the United States. ■

Excerpted from an article in Animating Democracy. Boggs is a Detroit-based author and activist.



From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY
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For the past several years, I've been part of a group called Transforming Families, in which families that include trans* kids come together for support, information sharing, and fun. My 18-year-old, Jie, identifies as trans*, which is what takes me to these meetings. (Jie, by the way, has absolutely given me permission to write about this, or I would not be doing so.)

I don't know your reaction to all of these gender identities, to the notion that gender is not a biological binary of male and female, but rather a complex and many-faceted reality. I don't know if you agree that a very significant aspect of gender is a social construct, not a biological one. My own processing about it has included pretty much every thought and feeling imaginable. Being with dozens of other families as they grapple with this new, often surprising, dimension of their lives has been very helpful and very interesting.

Jie has never been a gender-conforming kid. From earliest ages, this biologically female child wanted to be the king, the knight, or the daddy in imaginative games. At three, Jie asked if Santa Claus could change a girl into a boy. In pictures, you can absolutely see the moment when Jie realized the implications of dress to convey gender, and had complete wardrobe control—no more adorable gingham jumpers with covered buttons, no more sparkly shoes or flowered overalls.

Families in our group have very different experiences. Some have been caught completely off guard when their teenager, who has been sullen or angry or using drugs or otherwise generally manifesting unhappiness, comes out to them as trans*. Others have elementary-aged children who have already

declared their identity in a new gender and are changing their names in their classrooms.

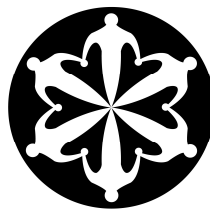
Knowing Jie, raising Jie, has opened me to a world of seeing gender in a new way. That Christmas long ago, I told Jie that Santa Claus couldn't change girls into boys, but doctors could and if Jie wanted to do that as an adult that would be OK. But later in childhood, Jie was clear that being a boy wasn't quite it either. When I asked Jie, about aged seven, "Do you think you're in the wrong body?" Jie's answer was, "Nope, this is my body. I feel like I'm in the wrong world."

Nothing is as transformative as love.

Jie's self-understanding in high school first centered on the word genderfluid and then genderqueer. When the broadening concept and the word trans* appeared, Jie was glad to have a larger community to be part of. And so am I. Still, though, Jie does not identify as either male or female, either he or she.

So, just from being born and living in the world, Jie has helped me to transform my understanding around gender. It's not like I was bigoted or close-minded before. But developing an understanding which involves your own family—every scrap of your own mind and heart and body—living with something, day in and day out, is much deeper than understanding about a general principle. Real transformation, deep transformation, comes from whole-bodied experience, not from simply declaring something to be so, or from having good intentions.

Nothing is as transformative as love. When Jie first told me not to use any pronouns, to use "Jie" as the pronoun, my reaction was not enthusiastic.



"That's just too hard," I said. (Sorry—I'm not a perfect parent, OK?) Jie looked at me sadly and said, "I see over and over how friends are so much more supportive than families are, even though families claim they love you best." Ouch. OK, I'll work on it. "I'm glad you have a short name at least," I said. Months later, I mostly get it right, but I still blow it when I'm stressed or distracted or otherwise not paying close attention.

At some point in my own process, I felt something release, and suddenly there was freedom where there had been resistance and constriction. Now I find it a delightful part of my life to be as conscious around gender and language as I have become, and my hat is off to the gender warriors like Jie who refuse to be categorized as one or the other. From the moment babies pop out of the womb we begin asking "Boy or girl?" and we never stop. The work of the folks in the Transforming Families group goes deep into unpacking unconscious assumptions and either/or thinking, and I am grateful to be part of this transformation.

A note on the word trans.*

* *The asterisk doesn't usually point to a footnote! Without the asterisk, the word trans or transgender is most often used to describe people who are, according to a standard dictionary, "appearing as, wishing to be considered as, or having undergone surgery to become a member of the opposite sex." (People who are not transgender, whose self-identity conforms with the gender they were assigned at birth, are sometimes known as cisgender.)*

The word trans, with the asterisk, is much more inclusive than the word transgender, and basically means anyone who is not cisgender. These identities include transgender, transsexual, and transvestite. But wait, there's more! Trans* is also understood to include genderqueer, genderfluid, non-binary, genderless, nongendered, two-spirit...and many other identities. ■*

REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

I can well remember from my childhood that most adults had a very strange habit. Pretty much any time you saw one of your parents' friends, or an out-of-town relative, they would greet you in exactly the same way: "Wow, you've grown!" they would declare in astonishment. "You look so different than last time I saw you!" And I would think, although I was much too shy to even consider saying it: *Well, yeah. Go figure. Last time you saw me I was three. Now I'm eight. Did you think I was going to look exactly the same?*

Of course children grow up. That's basically their job. When my daughter was four or five she used to greet each day with the declaration: "I got bigger overnight!" And she did, although you might not see it, morning by morning. But you sure could see it from month to month, and from year to year the changes were pretty dramatic, as they are with all children.

And so I am now one of those horrible adults who sees my 11-year-old niece for the first time in a couple of years and thinks *How could you possibly be so tall?* Worse yet, kids who I remember as seven- and eight-year-olds from church are now on Facebook with pictures of their apartments or even their babies. Their babies! How did that happen?

Somehow these kids, while I wasn't even looking, turned into grown-ups, doing grown-up things with their grown-up lives. And really, although on some level I find it shocking, I also know that this is what people do. They grow up. They transform. They change, not just a little, but completely.

Transformation, you see, is more than change. Any conversation we have or book we read or trip we go on might



change us a bit, give us a new way to see the world. But transformation means turning from one thing into another,

as dramatic as a caterpillar turning into a butterfly.

Here's the part we forget. We find it remarkable that caterpillars turn into butterflies, but really, the transformation from a drooling baby to an adult who can skillfully operate heavy machinery is just as amazing. But caterpillars tuck themselves into a cocoon for their transformation, so when they emerge from hiding the change seems like magic.



People transform more slowly, and they do it out in public, so if you're around for the whole show like parents are, then each morning-by-morning change isn't all that surprising. I'm sure every parent has moments of shock when their baby is ready to ride a bike or go to college or hike in Tibet. But really, mostly bit by bit what you see is change, not transformation.

It's only when you take a step back that you see what a huge thing all those little changes add up to. The nieces and nephews that we only see on occasion or our friends' children who we only catch sight of rarely are the ones who shock us into recognizing how transformation most often happens. When we see at once the result of all those gradual changes, we remember that big transformations are almost always the sum of a whole bunch of little changes.

There's a story—a true story—that has been making its way around the Internet lately about a man who transformed a barren sandbar in the Assam region of India into a lush forest. At age 16 he was so saddened by the sight of a bunch of snakes that had been washed onto the sandbar in a flood and then died from being out in the heat with no tree cover that he decided to do something. So Jadav "Molai" Payeng

started planting seeds. And he kept at it. By hand. One seed at a time.

Now, says an article in the Huffington Post, "that once-barren sandbar is a sprawling 1,360 acre forest, home to several thousands of varieties of trees and an astounding diversity of wildlife—including birds, deer, apes, rhino, elephants and even tigers."

Molai Payeng is now 47. He's still caring for the forest, which people call the Molai woods. He didn't just change that sandbar, he transformed it, utterly and completely. But he did it over 30 years, seed by seed.



Children transform as a matter of course, just by doing what children do. Adults have to try a little harder. Adults aiming for transformation have to choose a course, and decide to make little changes over and over again. It doesn't always happen, but sometimes it does.

I have a friend who decided to change her life, lost 100 pounds and now is a competitive pole dancer. I know someone who used get anxious just leaving the house who now does public speaking. They didn't transform overnight, but they did transform, step by step, seed by seed. Perhaps, even now, it is happening to you. ■

To live is to change, to acquire the words of a story....

—Barbara Kingsolver

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Nighttime, January

BY BILL NEELY

When breath catches in the crisp night air,
and sight turns to stars, mind to moon,
silence asserts itself,
breathing the beauty of night into being.
Silence, breathing beauty alive.

Each new night,
without effort, without planning,
turns eyes from task to sky,
feet from stride to stillness,
thoughts from next to now.

Each new night turns endings into
beginnings,
holds its splendor
in the awe of silence,
in wordless, voiceless, reverence.

The ancient night, new each eve,
turning, turning
the proud to humility,
the sure to wondrousness,
the clamorous to quiet.

The noise of days recedes
into a gentle, dark embrace—
exhaling into crisp silence.
Held by night, new and old,
embracing beginnings, again. ■

From With or Without Candlelight, a Meditation Anthology, edited by Victoria Safford, and published by Skinner House in 2009. Available from the UUA bookstore (www.uua.org/bookstore or 800-215-9076).