Transformers

Gould Discourse
St. Lawrence District Assembly
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As I have been preparing for this evening's conversation, I carry an awareness of three things.

First, the Gould discourse has history and tradition, having begun when I was a young adult, before I was even a Unitarian Universalist, and so I feel the presence of the invisible host – all those who have spoken, all those who have listened, or pretended to listen; all that has been remembered and forgotten and remembered again. We are in the presence of history as I stand before you.

Second, this is likely to be the final Gould Discourse delivered under the auspices of the St. Lawrence District, since tomorrow is the vote to dissolve that venerable institution and meld our energies into the Central East Region. As far as I can tell, the invisible host supports that change, and the Gould Discourse will go on.

Third, today is April Fool's Day. I am not sure what to make of that fact, but there it is.

The Gould Discourse series began with an Odyssey, the narrative of a life's journey, delivered by Religious Educator Josephine T. Gould in October 1978. Jo Gould began her odyssey by quoting Greek poet CV Cavafy's beloved lines about the ten-year journey of Odysseus, as he returned home to Ithaca after the ten-year Trojan War – having been gone, between the warring and the journeying, for two decades, it is no wonder that most had given him up for dead. The guidance for the journey recommends, "When you start your journey for Ithaka, then pray that your way be long, full of adventure, full of knowledge; … pray that ... the summer mornings are many, that you will enter ports seen for the first time with such gratitude, with such joy! … visit hosts of Egyptian cities, to learn and learn from those who have knowledge. … Always keep Ithaka fixed in your mind. To arrive there is your ultimate goal. But do not hurry the voyage at all. It is better to let it last for long years; and even to anchor at the isle when you are old, rich with all that you have gained on the way, not expecting that Ithaka will offer you riches. Ithaka has given you the beautiful voyage. Without her you would never have taken the road. But she has nothing more to give you. And if you find her poor, Ithaka has not defrauded you. With the great wisdom you have gained, with so much experience, you must surely have understood by then what Ithakas mean."

Following that wise guidance, and having at my disposal the online file that contains all – well, most – of the previous Gould presentations back to the inaugural address by Charles Howe in 1983, I decided to begin with my own journey by traveling back through time – so I sat down to read through them all. No one ever accused me of not knowing how to procrastinate creatively. And what a long, adventuresome journey that has been, spending long evenings over the past few weeks reveling in the words of colleagues past and present. It was a bit like eating potato chips – I could not just read one, and I found that each discourse, and each response, whetted my curiosity about what the next might hold.

The Gould talks cover a significant swath of our recent Unitarian Universalist history, and of course, each discursant is a product of his or her own time and place in that historical evolution. And quite remarkably, as it turns out, even with my relatively short tenure in ministry, I know many of them, either well or in some distantly related way, so this has been a journey of engagement and love. As I read, I watched our faith movement evolve, sort of like watching an

old filmstrip – there were some missing pages where a two-sided document evidently got scanned on one side only, and the process is definitely in need of a qualified proofreader, but that human quality of imperfection only made the process sweeter somehow.

I observed the evolution of our ideas about ministry – both professional ministry and the ministry of the laity, from Charles Howe's discussion in 1983 of the rich possibilities that were being discovered for shared ministry in our congregations, to Sam Trumbore's in 2005, as he spoke of the power that grows among us when we define common purpose and trust the process. "Your gifts," quoted Sam, from words by Rebecca Parker – "Your gifts – whatever you discover them to be – can be used to bless or curse the world." The gifts are many: Martha Munson called us to be partners in covenant, Daniel Budd extolled the promise of imagination, and Joel Miller talked about the potential of Appreciative Inquiry to bring forth the deepest gifts of our dynamic faith movement.

I watched through these writings as professional ministry was defined and redefined, as the focus of ministry moved from generalist, to specialization, and then folded back in to rediscover the ministerial generalist. A gift of these discourses was the new insights I gained into the emotional stakes in those definitions, the sense of being respected or disrespected in a presumed hierarchy of ministry with the parish minister at the top of the heap. The conversations moved through time as the Minister of Religious Education specialty emerged in 1979, and Community Ministry (linked to the pastoral function of chaplaincy or to social action roles) in 1991 – and then Liz Strong took on a tough topic in her 1998 Gould presentation, reviewing the decisions being made to de-emphasize the specialties in ministerial preparation and allow them to emerge later on the career path. I now better understand the emotional and professional meaning of what I was hearing as I was entered the ministry during the first decade of the new millennium, when ministerial preparation had been folded back into the paradigm of "minister as generalist" – or perhaps "parish ministry as the basic model" – once again, or perhaps just "hanging out and being religious," as Dick Gilbert so succinctly put it back in his 1991 talk.

When I began my reading journey, the St. Lawrence District was much larger than it is today, stretching across the border to include congregations in the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Quebec as well as upper and western New York State. Gould speakers were a mix of ministers either from or serving in both Canada and the US, until suddenly with the Canadian Unitarian Council's move in 2002 to declare their own independence of the Unitarian Universalist Association, quite suddenly Canadian discursants appeared no more. Change is the only constant, I suppose.

There were new insights to be gained from Jane Bramadat's 2001 analogy of the CUC-UUA split as the relationship between a mouse that claimed its power, and an elephant that was a bit bemused by the process. But I felt the loss of our international partnership perhaps most keenly in reading Mark DeWolfe's lovely essay, written in 1987, about the role of UU ministers as guardians and transformers, knowing that Mark was lost to us the following year in the tragedy of the AIDS epidemic. He served our congregation in Mississauga, Ontario, and when I did a brief consultation with them over 20 years later, they were still grieving the loss of a remarkable minister.

And then there are the discourses that reflected on those perennial and emerging issues of what it means to be a church in a world of uncertainty and change, with an increased awareness of social trauma, emerging technology, new cultures of affiliation and distance from institutions. The puzzle of sustaining a faith movement that lives in religious institutions poses new challenges in

what seems to be an era of deinstitutionalization, but who knows what the larger patterns of change might bring.

And so then, with all this history and perspective swirling in my fevered brain, I started writing. Taking a bit of poetic liberty, I advise that when you start your journey for Syracuse – another one of those cities that New Yorkers named a bit pretentiously for classic Mediterranean locales – then pray that your way be long, full of adventure, full of knowledge. Be aware that this city is where Josephine Gould became a Unitarian, where she found her lifelong passion for Religious Education, and where she became a significant influence in our faith movement.

When you set out for Syracuse, know that this is where the Unitarians and Universalists met in 1959 to work out the collaboration that would create this dynamic and emerging way of faith – and I know more about those issues now because Charles Eddis explored that contentious collaborative adventure in his Gould discourse in the year 2000. What was the nature of the new organization created at that time: was it intended simply, as Eddis claims, to be a larger house that Unitarians and Universalists could inhabit together, keeping clear their separate identities? Or was it, as he tells us was proclaimed by Donald Harrington, "a new synthesis, the coalescence of a new consensus, a new world faith, formulated by and fitted for the great, new world-age that is coming to birth in our time?"

We are still discovering that, I think. And now, here we are back in Syracuse at a new transition point in our history. When you set out for Syracuse, knowing that anything might happen along the way, pray that your way be long, full of adventure, full of new learning . . . and I would add, ask that your way be full of transformation.

I had long since identified "Transformers" as my title and theme for this evening's talk before I explored the discourses that came before – and of course, I have been pointedly reminded that there is nothing new under the sun. Charles Eddis in 2000 named the task of transformation as the essential nature of Unitarian Universalism. He quoted a professor at Harvard Divinity School, who observed that "Unitarians are Calvinists turned inside out! … [in the] strong impulse many of us have to change the world, to make the world a better place for all its people. It refers to our hunger for social justice, our hankering to change society to foster and spread human rights, opportunities, and prosperity. The better world today includes trying to save the environment. This is not a concern with the saving of souls while the world goes to hell. This is saving the world and the people in it, as much as we can." It would seem, in our quest to transform the world, that we are the un-Calvinists – those Universalists among us will be heartened by that notion, I think.

And Mark DeWolfe, back in 1987, named the ministers of our movement as "guardians and transformers" of the faith, claiming that the cohering factor in all the activities that ministers do is that "they are all involved in the extension and transformation of our religion in the lives of the people . . . transforming it into a living reality for them." And then Deane Perkins in 2011 reminded us that Peter Morales, in the Baltimore sermon where he introduced the eight components necessary for a faith community to be "a religion for our time," proclaimed that "A religion for our time must strive to transform the world."

And my point this evening is that for all of us, whatever our role in this Unitarian Universalist faith movement, the act of transformation is our heritage, our covenant and our call. We are transformers. And what might a Transformer be? I invite you to picture a quiet Sunday afternoon. You are out running errands in your car, you pull up to a stoplight and a quite unremarkable car pulls up and idles next to you – and then out of nowhere, the doors spring open, the hood extends, a head pops up, arms and legs

unfold, and suddenly there beside you is a giant fighting robot, ready to do battle with the enemies of planet earth. You have encountered a Transformer.

As I tried out this theme on people in the last few months, there was just one who picked up on the title's play on words, blurting out "Ha! Like the cartoons!" before he realized he was talking to a minister and might be insulting my topic. For those of you less culturally conversant, the Transformers are both action figures and cartoon characters, giant fighting robots called Autobots who, in the grand tradition of superheroes throughout time, adopt a disguise when they are not being heroic. They hide their true identity, presenting themselves as cars or trucks, speedboats or motorcycles, moving among us undetected. They came to Earth from outer space to battle our enemies, fighting those called the Decepticons who want to destroy humanity and take over our rich resources. And no, this is not a political speech.

My personal and inspiring favorite, Optimus Prime, is the leader of the Autobots. His disguise is a truck: a high-utility heavy-duty cab-over truck, in the powerful colors of red, blue and silver. And in his robot form, he is huge, powerful and amazing: "compassionate, caring towards others and with a human-like heart of justice." Optimus is a truck, so he knows how to haul a load; he is a robot and he knows how to fight for justice; whatever it takes, he gets the job done. My kind of robot hero. And there are Transformers, more than you might think -- the sturdy utility trucks and the flashy robot heroes – among you in every one of our congregations.

Why, you might ask, did I choose a topic like Transformers, evoking the image of cartoon heroes and action figures, for my serious and historic lecture? It is because I firmly believe that we are all transformers, and that the act of transformation is our heritage, our covenant and our call as Unitarian Universalists.

A congregant in a church I served once asked, rhetorically, "Why would you join a church if you did not want to be transformed?" In our Unitarian Universalist faith movement, we can find ourselves transformed, transforming and transformers, and I believe that transformation is the truth at the core of our identity. It is a rallying cry calling us into who we might be, how we choose to make our place in the world. Transformation is at the center of our Unitarian Universalist faith movement; yes, our covenant and our call.

I will admit, however, that I have not always believed in transformation. I used to think there were two states: there is growing, and there is grown; unfinished, and finished. And once you are grown you are complete, right? No more unfinished edges, no more changing to do. Even as I had amazing experiences, learning and changing in many ways, I always assumed that who you are is who you are. I never really considered the option that some part of my essential nature was actually within my control, and that I might choose on purpose the sort of person I want to be. And then, as the years moved on, I finally realized that my ways of being, my perspective and patterns of behavior, were not serving me well. And after some struggle, a lot of resistance and many great gifts of help from wise teachers and mentors, I learned that with a goal and a vision, with the proper coaching and the necessary skills and tools, and most important, with intentionality and willingness to believe it is possible, a human being can transform.

And since the work of my life, including my ministry, has been with organizations and communities, I learned that with vision, with coaching and intentionality, human organizations can transform. Indeed, in a changing world, I am quite certain that we not only can, we must transform ourselves, individually and collectively, in order to be part of transforming the world in a direction toward love and wholeness. If we do not, the Decepticons win.

I am a professional interim minister, and part of my motivation and my own call is helping to support Transformers and make sure the Decepticons do not win. Intentional interim work is a fairly unusual type of ministry, with Accredited Interim Ministers making up about 4% of all professional ministers in our movement. And even more unusual is the fact that I discovered my call to this work while I was in seminary. I wanted to be part of facilitating congregational transitions and transformations. That is the work of my heart. Truth be told, I chose the path of interim ministry without ever seriously considering seeking a called settlement. Part of my story is that I am one of a growing number of people entering the UU ministry as a mid-life career transition – I sometime joke that it can be defined as mid-life if I expect to live well beyond 100. Suffice it to say, I had some professional miles on me by the time I was ordained seven years ago, and I knew this work would suit me well.

Being a professional interim makes me a rather odd duck among ministers, and I am often asked how I can stand to pack up and move every couple of years, and even more, how I handle saying good-bye to beloved congregations again and again and again. I sometimes suspect that my interim colleagues and I are viewed with a bit of suspicion by our more rooted colleagues: as though we are not quite serious about ministry; not deep, not willing to dig in for the long haul – somewhere between vagabonds and flibbertigibbits.

However that may be perceived, what is most true for me is that the work I do, my passion and my call, is in its essence all about transition, and even more, all about transformation. When we journey to Ithaca, or to Syracuse or to Canton or Oneonta, to Buffalo or to Schenectady, we are making a journey of transition, leaving behind the old shore, navigating uncharted waters, making landfall on a new shore. We may be returning to home, perhaps, but in the journey both we and the city are changed, making the mythical journey to Ithaca a journey of transformation. We are not the same person, or the same congregation, at the end of the journey as when we set out. The fundamental work of religion, it seems to me, is transformation. For what end do we seek if not the healing, the transformation of ourselves, each other and the world?

Transformation is all around us. The caterpillar dissolves in the chrysalis to become a butterfly; mild-mannered reporter Clark Kent changes more than his clothes in the phone booth to emerge as Superman; a car or a truck unfolds into a robot to defend humanity – every common thing, it seems, holds the hidden possibility to become something amazingly more. Everything is more than meets the eye. Transformation is a change of state, a change in function and presence; it is metamorphosis, shapeshifting, alchemy; it is the butterfly, the flying superhero and a magnificent fighting robot. To transform is the true nature of anything and everything; we are all transforming, transformers and transformed in cycles and processes both within and beyond our control, responding to a changing world, to our own internal changes, to whatever it is that calls to us to go deeper, higher, wider in our passion, our love, our commitment. Through the deep genius of transformation, everything in our world is more than meets the eye.

An ancient Sufi tale captures the essence of the fear and liberation as an opportunity arises for transformation in our lives. The story tells of a stream that is making its way through mountains and plains, turning and adapting to overcome every obstacle, until it reaches the desert. When the stream runs into the sand, its water just disappears, and the stream loses its identity. It tries many times but all attempts fail. The stream asks, "Could this be the end? Is there no way for me to continue?" Then a voice comes from the wind, "If you stay the way you are, you cannot cross the sands. You will remain a quagmire. To go further you must lose yourself to find yourself again." "But if I lose myself," replies the stream in anguish, "I will never know what I'm supposed to be." "On the contrary," says the wind, "if you lose yourself you will become more than you ever dreamed you could be." Taking a leap of faith, the stream surrenders to the sun and evaporates

into the heavens, transforming into a cloud that is carried on the wind across the great desert, where it falls to the earth as cleansing rain, its essence renewed, its form transfigured, to continue its journey.

<u>Appreciative conversation #1</u> We are going to pause here, and I ask you to think about a time when you have been transformed – not necessarily a ground-shaking event, but something that changed you – your ideas, your perspective, your feelings – at a deep level, carrying you forward into something new. I am going to give you one minute to think, and then I will ask you to turn to a neighbor and tell them very briefly what it was that changed you – not a lot of details or background, just the basic facts of the event. I will time you so that each of you has time to share your transformative event. First, a time of silence for your thoughts.

Organizational researcher C. Otto Scharmer, in his book, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges*, connects the process of transformation to what he calls *presencing*. "Presencing, the blending of sensing and presence, means to connect with the Source of the highest future possibility and to bring it into the now. When moving into the state of presencing, perception begins to happen from a future possibility that depends on us to come into reality. In that state we step into our real being, who we really are, our authentic self.

Presencing is a movement where we approach our self from the emerging future. In many ways, presencing resembles sensing. Both involve shifting the place of perception from the interior to the exterior of one's (physical) organization. The key difference is that sensing shifts the place of perception to the current whole while presencing shifts the place of perception to the source of an emerging future whole - to a future possibility that is seeking to emerge. … A deep threshold … needs to be crossed in order to connect to one's real source of presence, creativity, and power. … [T]he two root questions of creativity [are] "Who is my Self? and What is my Work?" The "capital-S Self." By this [is meant] one's highest self, the self that transcends pettiness and signifies our "best future possibility." Similarly, "capital-W Work" is not one's current job, but one's purpose, what you are here on earth to do.

Presencing happens when our perception begins to connect to the source of our emerging future. The boundaries between three types of presence collapse: the presence of the past (current field), the presence of the future (the emerging field of the future), and the presence of one's authentic Self. When this co-presence, or merging of the three types of presence, begins to resonate, we experience a profound shift, a change of the place from which we operate."

It all begins with seeing. Real, deep transformation – making the space for something new to emerge – begins with taking the time and attention to stop and look, to perceive what really *is,* without preconditions or prejudice; to see things as they really are. Scharmer makes the point that transformation begins when we stop to see, perhaps to listen to each other with intention, with an open mind, following the flow of life. That is where it begins, and perhaps it is also the most difficult step, because so often we are moving so quickly, getting things done, downloading images and information, that it is easy to see only what we expect to see, missing what is right there in front of us. Science tells us that seeing, vision, "occurs neither in the eyes nor in the brain, but emerges from the collaboration of the eyes and the rest of the brain." Our eyes take in massive amounts of information, much more in both quantity and complexity than we can reasonably use, and so "the eye and brain work in a partnership to interpret conflicting signals from the outside world. Ultimately [as one scientific website summarizes it], we see whatever our brains think we should."

It happens to me all the time – I expect to see things a certain way, and that is the way I perceive them, completely missing, overlooking, the things that are unexpected or that do not fit the pattern of my thinking. I walk right past the item I am looking for on the grocery shelf because the packaging is a different color than I expected; I fail to notice something new in my environment until someone else exclaims in astonishment, "How could you not see it? It's right there!" And so I go back and look again, with a more open mind, and sure enough, there it is.

That is the reality of our perceptual system, which is socially and biologically programmed to help us function efficiently in the world. And for the most part, it works great – but it also is a very powerful way for us to stay stuck in the status quo, because what our brains are programmed to see in the moment is based on what we have seen in the past, what has been relevant in the past. We miss connections because they are unexpected; we miss opportunities for what is new. Otto Scharmer calls this the "blind spot of our time," and he asks, "Why do our attempts to deal with the challenges of our time so often fail? Why are we stuck in so many quagmires today? The cause of our collective failure is that we are blind to the deeper dimension of leadership and transformational change. This 'blind spot' exists not only in our collective leadership but also in our everyday social interactions. We are blind to the source dimension from which effective leadership and social action come into being."

That socially programmed blind spot is the reason why seeing is the first step: in order to change, in order to allow something new to emerge, we must be fully present to our perceptions in a different way. To open our perception in that blind spot, we must choose intentionally to slow down, stop, tell our brain to release its preconditioned patterns. When we suspend our judgments and connect to wonder, we open ourselves to a more complete reality than we had seen before. And when we open ourselves to relationship and engage in real dialogue, we begin to see together with others in ways that magnify our potential to engage in transformational change.

The second step, perceiving more deeply than seeing, is *sensing*, opening our heart to understand a system from the inside. In a new kind of conversation, people move from "expressing opinions and making statements" to asking "genuine questions" … not just talking together, but thinking together. "When this happens," says Scharmer, "the place from which our perception arises moves from inside our individual heads to outside the organizational boundaries of the observer." As we share our individual stories, the larger pattern emerges. The connection moves from the head to the heart. As Scharmer says, "Opening the heart means accessing and activating the deeper levels of our emotional perception. Listening with the heart literally means using the heart and our capacity for appreciation and love as an organ of perception. At this point, we can actually see with the heart."

And when we sense, when we listen and see with the heart, we apprehend the larger picture, the current whole of how the field is structured and mobilized. Participants come to see themselves as part of the system, and to see their part in creating the system – and sometimes that means we can see how we are part of maintaining a system that is not producing the results we really want. And from that point there begins to arise the possibility for true transformation.

<u>Appreciative conversation #2</u> Once again, I will ask you now to think then pair and share. Reflecting on your experience of transformation, what was most powerful about it, what made it transformative? How did your perceptions shift? First, time for the introverts, think in silence. Now turn to your neighbor, share what made the event transformative, and as you share in conversation, a ask you to notice: what characteristics did your transformative experiences have in common with each other? This is part of noticing what makes an experience transformative.

Otto Scharmer's *Theory U* diagram is, as you might expect, shaped like the letter U. He places the first two phases of the transformative process, seeing and sensing, on the left side of a downward swooping arrow. Scharmer developed his model from in-depth interviews with a broad span of leaders all over the globe, in all walks of life, who have been successful in various ways of transforming the world – and what he found was "the deepening of a profound opening process that happens … when groups of people begin to become aware of and connect with the deeper meaning of their life journeys."

A shift takes place we move through seeing and sensing, as the arrow reaches the deepest part of the U, and we enter into a type of listening, as Scharmer says, that "moves beyond the current field and connects us to an even deeper realm of emergence. [He calls this deeper] level of listening "generative listening," or listening from the emerging field of future possibility. This level of listening requires us to access not only our open heart, but also our open will - our capacity to connect to the highest future possibility that can emerge. We no longer look for something outside," but rather deep within our own Self for that which calls us forth. At this point, says Scharmer, "We are in an altered state. *Communion* or *grace* is maybe the word that comes closest to the texture of this experience."

In generative listening, opening our will, we reach the point of Presencing – the blending of sensing and presence, in which we connect with the Source of the highest future possibility and bring it into the now. "Presencing," says Scharmer, "is a movement where we approach our self from the emerging future," connecting with the deeper meaning of our life journey. Presencing enhances sensing, just as sensing enhances seeing. Sensing extends seeing by moving our locus of attention 'inside' a phenomenon. Presencing enlarges the activity of sensing by using our Self. The root of the word presencing is *es*, which means 'to be,' that is, 'I am.' [The words] *essence*, *yes*, *presence*, and *present* all share this same Indo-European root. [A] derivative of this same root from India is the word *sat*, which means both 'truth' and 'goodness.'"

When we open our mind with deeper *seeing* of things as they really are, when we open our heart with deeper *listening* that draws us into a perception of appreciation and love, and when we open our will into the presence of our truest self, then we begin to operate in the world in a new way, in a way guided by our own truth and goodness. We let go of all that is extraneous; we surrender the well-worn patterns of the past and become fully present to what emerges in conversation and discovery. In this process, we connect with our highest self, "the self that transcends pettiness and signifies our 'best future possibility.'" And it is from this deep and powerful place that we may discover our true Work – our purpose, "what we are here on earth to do."

Open to transformation, in the presence of our authentic self; we move from knowledge into wisdom; we prepare to create new patterns guided by a new vision of the possibility that is emerging. Following our journey along the U, as we begin to operate from the authentic self in the place of deep connection, we are ready to rise and take our presence into the world, crystallizing our vision and intention, "surfacing a living imagination of the future whole" to shape the emerging future. And then we can begin to act in new ways; we begin to move in the world from that deep and powerful place that is the source of possibility, creating the future "in unity of hand, heart and mind."

Some people come to church seeking what they might call spirituality or spiritual deepening and do not know where to find it in our congregations – but they suspect it is here somewhere among us, and they yearn for something to take them deeper. Transforming ourselves, transforming the world. I think that spiritual deepening has two interdependent facets: first, the seeker has to be willing to embark on this journey into presencing that Otto Scharmer so eloquently describes – a

journey of opening the mind, opening the heart, opening the will, taking the bold step to release judgment and seek our capital-S Self, and discover our capital-W Work. That is a journey of commitment and is not without its element of risk. It can be done in any setting, at any time, in any place. That journey can be made in any congregation, in any community, and we can serve as the transformers who create the place, the safety and guidance, for that to happen.

To do that, our congregations must be willing to offer the opportunity for people to see and hear, to deepen into presence and to move in the world in a different way. People seek those opportunities in different forms – some through music and others through word, some in meditation, some in learning or teaching, yet others in community action. Some are called to deepen their leadership skills and to create structures and processes that strengthen institutions, while others are called to create art that challenges or soothes the ear and eye. All those deepening paths are available in any of our churches, fellowships and societies, if we are open to engaging with them.

The path might be in a gathering like Wellspring or a covenant circle, or in teaching religious education, or in working on a new model of governance that frees up energy for new possibilities. The paths are many, the deepening is in community, as we learn to listen with an open heart, discovering how we are called to transform the world, and collaborating with others to do the work to which we are called. There are so many paths into transformation.

As an intentional interim minister, I am drawn to the possibilities for transformation that lie hidden like a treasure within our people and our congregations in our times of change. Transition becomes transformation as we face the dangers of the unknown, embrace challenges as possibilities, as we open our hearts and minds to new ideas, new commitments, new loves. Even more, I have come to believe that the essence of what we do here, the alpha and omega of our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition, is transformation – personal, institutional and global transformation is at the heart of our calling as a people of faith, whether we are laity or clergy, whether we are singing in the choir or shoveling the walks.

Management consultant Peter Drucker once wrote that the core product of all social-sector organizations is “a changed human being.” Congregational consultant Dan Hotchkiss proposes that a congregation’s mission is its unique answer to the question, “Whose lives do we intend to change and in what way?” How might this world be transformed as we respond to our internal urgings, as we hear a cry for help or see our fellow beings in danger; as we allow our own transformation to move us to a new level of love and power? Transformation is a central element in the hero’s journey, the essential, personal and cultural journey of self-discovery in the world.

In keeping with our superhero theme, our journey to Ithaca, our journey to our truest self, is what mythologist Joseph Campbell names as the hero’s journey: accepting the call to adventure, facing tests and trials, and returning to the ordinary world “with treasure that has the power to transform the world as the hero [themself] has been transformed.” The journey into transformation begins when we respond to that first call to adventure – we often speak of the ordained minister’s call to ministry, but the sense of call is wider and more inclusive, and it pertains to every human life. As Oprah Winfrey has said, “We're all called. If you're here breathing, you have a contribution to make to our human community. The real work of your life is to figure out your function -- your part in the whole -- as soon as possible, and then get about the business of fulfilling it as only you can." The hero’s journey, and the power of transformation, belongs to us each and all. Our responsibility in the matter is not only to respond and to embark, but also to bring back and offer the treasure that has the power to transform the world as we ourselves have been transformed.

Appreciative Conversation #3 One final time, I invite you into conversation, to consider and discuss this question: How in our congregations can we provide the setting and opportunity for people to have experiences of transformation, and of transforming the world?

It is an act of courage to step into the possibility of transformation. Consultant Margaret Wheatley comments that *fearlessness* is the core transformational strategy, saying, "To be fearless is to face the reality of your situation; to recognize what you can actually achieve, … deciding who you want to be, so that you can stand firm for the practices you believe in most deeply. … This type of fearlessness can be found in anyone" in any time or place, in any role in any organization or community.

And so we are, each and all of us, transformer and transformed, subject and object in the hero's journey. We arrive to be transformed if we but heed the call, know ourselves as fearless, and accept the invitation to embark on the journey of the hero, the journey to Ithaca – to enter the chrysalis and dissolve, to evaporate from the life we have known, to be carried on the wind to destinations where we may become more than we ever dreamed we could be.

Change is inevitable and all around us, but transformation is a choice. We stand today somewhere in a process of change – perhaps in the midst of the whirlwind, perhaps on the cusp of a new era. We are a people of covenant, guardians and transformers, co- creating this new synthesis, this new consensus, a new world faith, formulated by and fitted for the great, new world-age that is coming to birth in our time.

I agree with Peter Morales that a religion for our time must engage in the work of transformation, transforming ourselves to transform the world. With open mind, open heart, and open will, in all our presence and possibility, the opportunities are right here on our long journey, a journey willed with adventure and knowledge. And at the last, with the great wisdom we have gained, with so much experience, we come to understand at last what Ithacas mean. With deep gratitude to Josephine Gould and all the colleagues and listeners in this invisible host, amen and blessed be.

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