

# Big “T” and little “t” Transformation

a sermon by the Reverend Dr. Susan Veronica Rak

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Last year, at the start of my ministerial sabbatical, I attended a conference called “The Center for Excellence in Ministry” - presented by the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association. It promised to be a week of professional development and collegial engagement. The opening worship on our first evening was quite stirring. The music was amazing - upbeat and contemporary. And UU ministers do like to sing hymns, so we sounded really good... even though I was not into the hand-waving as much as some others. The preacher that first evening was one of our best - Reverend Jane Rzepka. It was an odd sermon, to my mind, but quite fitting. You see, she took on the conference planners for the promises they made in the literature advertising the conference - challenged them and us.

“Be changed” was a catchphrase that was repeated over and over again as the conference was advertised to us. The promotional materials promised “transformation.” Rev. Rzepka, in her excellent preaching style and dead-pan delivery, admitted that these kinds of promises made her nervous.

“Looking out at all of you here in this room, I like you,” she said. “And, if by the end of the week you have all transformed into something different than you are, I am going to be left feeling pretty unbalanced.”

I can understand her trepidation. There were some 400 of us there... that’s a lot of change! The questions she invited were for us to think about exactly what we meant by “transformation”, by change. And she suggested we clarify what we were after by reflecting on the difference between “Big T” and Little t” transformations.

Change and transformation, growth and evolution, are part of our Unitarian Universalist theology. The expectation of change is built into our hopes and goals all the time. But the trouble is, as much as we agree with that in theory, we like things to not change too much. Not that we want to be mired in the status-quo, but we do like some consistency and dependability. There is comfort in that. And there is danger in getting stuck.

So the question before us, then and now, as we take up this idea of congregational revitalization, of growth, is “do we really want to be changed, transformed?” Because that’s what a revival is going to do to you - change you... transform us all.

So, the two kinds of transformation: “Big T” and “little t”.

A “little t” transformation... those incremental steps we make toward being a better person or taking off some pounds or losing a bad habit. Maybe it’s learning to become a *little* more forgiving or a *little* more courageous, a *little* more committed or a *little* more at peace. The kinds of things that others may not even notice, that you’ve not spoken about with anyone or posted on Facebook. Sometimes we forget how important these small “t” transformations are. AND that the more we make of them, the more we are changed and transformed, the more we grow, the more we evolve.

It was Rev. Rzepka's thinking that "Big T" transformations are not all they are cracked up to be. That our reliance on them works to our detriment. And in a way, I agree.

We all aspire to live our Unitarian Universalist Principles and when we read through them, I am guessing that images of grand, good things on a global scale come to mind. World peace, cooperation, saving the earth, creating justice and equality for everyone... it is all a very tall order.

We may feel that if we have not changed the world like a Gandhi or a Martin Luther King Jr or a Susan B Anthony, then our lives don't count for much; that we are failures. We might give up - or not even try because we will never be capable of doing those "Big T" transformations. Yet as much as we admire and respect and are inspired by those who in one way or another through their lives created these "Big T" transformations, what will really matter in most of our lives are the little ones.

Her sermon that evening struck a chord in all of us. For the remainder of the conference, presenters, preachers and program leaders began to structure their talks and conversations around this "big and little t" divide. It seemed as if everyone felt the need to clarify whether they were talking about transformation or change in their capitalized forms or not. Unitarian Universalist ministers were raising their hands in the air - not with praise songs but in making "air quotes" around the kind of "t" they were talking about.

And reflecting the other theme of the conference - which was shaping our faith for the 21st century - because Unitarian Universalist can't possibly be satisfied with just one idea - we also started talking about what kind of transformation was needed for a UU "revival" of sorts.

Some ministers were up front about where they stood: the purpose of our faith is to transform both our members and our world in great big, substantial and significant ways... to emulate our heroes, those who give selflessly and generously and sacrificially to the cause of greater human liberation. The broken and hurting world we find ourselves inhabiting certainly needs more "Big T" transformation... acknowledging that, we can too easily dismiss "little t" transformations as just so much navel-gazing. What are we doing worrying about self-improvement concerns?

One colleague likened it to thinking about our congregations [and our UU Association] as auto-repair shop. Would we be serving the world and our values if we only gave folks the equivalent of a tire rotation and oil-change, when what was really needed was a total engine rebuild - a conversion to a greener, more efficient, more productive version of our faith that really did transform the world.

But then others talked about what we must do for the people in our congregations - or the ones just coming in - those who feel broken and burdened, battered in spirit, seeking - something?. In our spiritual auto-repair clinic, they don't want or need a complete engine overhaul... they need an oil change, a new air filter... maybe a tire-rotation.

Which is it going to be? What is the direction that will be the best for the future of our faith? What will it take to get our revival going? A year removed from the week in Monterey, I am still asking... am I someone who favors the *big-T Transformation* or the *small-t transformation*?

And which are you? Are you a big-T or are you a small-t person?

And, what about our Unitarian Universalist tradition?

I think we are all over the place... as we we affirm and promote the acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth, we are "little t". And as we affirm a world of peace justice... when we are ready to mount the barricades [or storm the Bastille] we are "Big T".

And something else we need to acknowledge - remember and celebrate - is that those "little t" transformation are what makes the "Big" T transformations possible. Our UU faith communities - our congregations - are places of radical acceptance and radical welcome to all who would come in.

We have found a way to be together in our difference... if not always smoothly. We strive for inclusion. We do things like become a Welcoming Congregation, perhaps not always sure at the time why we are undertaking such a challenge. Or we wonder if it is really necessary.

Once that new venture was undertaken, we found in it deeper insight and many challenges. And we've discovered in the living of that "welcome", new and deeper ways of being together... having our eyes opened to the rich variety of ways people are on this planet... reveling in the complexity of it all, taking the risk of making room for and including all that we might have once deemed as "other".

Ours is a community that accepts and values and treasures our theological diversity, our diversity in gender and sexual orientation, and our multigenerational make up.

Rev. Rzepka challenged us. She said that we "can't have it both ways. We can't be both about the notion that we are places where you are accepted for who you are and places that tell you that you are in need of transformation."

I don't know about that. I guess I am not ready to plant my flag in one camp or the other. In our hymns, we sing of acceptance and welcome and *small-t transformation* in hymns like "Come, Come Whoever You Are". And then, in that same hymnbook, we sing "Hail the Glorious Golden City" or "We'll Build a World" - *Big T transformation* writ large.

We are not one nor the other... we are, as always, "both/and". That is what a revival is all about - *little and Big T transformations*. When you think about a "revival", you are talking about change, transformation. And I expect it's going to be a mix of big and small transformations.

*Come... be changed!*

## *Commitment*

My colleague Joshua Snyder, who serves the Unitarian Universalist congregation in Wilmington DE, recalls,

"Back when I attended a mainline Christian Church, I always knew when the sermon was going to be about money. You see when the Bible reading for the day was from II Corinthians, '*God loves a cheerful giver,*' then you knew what was going to follow."

Well... here it is, *Canvass Sunday*. You may think that all this - this Service, this wonderful music, the brunch that will follow - is all about softening you up to give more money. And I suppose there is a germ of truth in that... let's face it: money matters.

We've already heard about a proposed budget for the next fiscal year, one that always anticipates a certain level of generosity on the part of us all. Sometimes our head swims with numbers, lost in the eddies of income and expenses and reserves and the like.

It is tempting to become ostrich-like and bury our little noggins in the sand. Former UUA President John Buehrens tells

"...the story of a Southern evangelist who said to his flock: 'Brothers and sisters, there's work to be done. Great good to be got. But first we got to take that first little step. And then the second. Then we got to walk together, and not grow weary.'

'Amen,' said the congregation. "

Now, every time the congregation says, 'Amen' in this story, it would help if you all would offer an 'Amen.' go ahead... try it...

'We got to run together, and not grow faint.'

'Amen.' (The church responds, 'Amen.')

'We got to spread our wings like eagles and fly!'

'Amen.' (The church responds, 'Amen.')

'But', said the preacher, 'we all know today it takes money to fly!'

There were a few scattered 'Amens,' but mostly silence.

And then a voice piped up from the back, 'Then let's walk, preacher!'"

I'm not asking that we fly... I fancy myself too much of a realist for that! But I hope we can do more than walk. The truth is, though, that you are not going to give because the numbers move you to generosity. You aren't going to seriously "up" your financial commitment because you see the possibility of some red ink.

Last night we were channel-surfing, looking to see if there were something to watch on cable [hundreds of stations but good golly, not much to see there!] So I said, "let me check PBS, good old channel 13 will have something of value - a classic movie at the very least!"

But no - it is their "pledge week" and so it was hours and hours of nostalgia music shows. Three hours of 1970's soul and R&B? Sounds great... except that perhaps one hour of that time will be taken up with pleas for memberships, with offers of amazing "thank you" gifts to sweeten the deal.

Maybe we should try that... interrupt the Service every ten minutes or so for a "pledge break".

We could try offering you CD's of the greatest hits of the harpsichord, if Dan wanted to start a recording career.

Maybe we can create DVD's of some sermons and make them available for a generous pledge. Alternately, we could pitch those as a cure for insomnia!

Perhaps we can collect all the umbrellas folks have left behind over the years and put an artfully designed TUS sticker on them - you'd make a pledge to get one of those, right?

We could threaten you with the roof caving in - oh, the roof and the building does need some work, but it's not about to collapse around our ears.

Yet what we ask of one another at this time of years does have to do with support... because we need your support, your annual pledge, your giving, donating of your time and your treasure, to do more than meet the budget. Yes, we need everyone's help to pay

the bills, to keep the lights on, to support the wonderful religious education programs we create for children and youth, to make and keep our facilities warm and inviting and welcoming - and even inspiring.

Your pledge of support - the amount you donate each week or month over the course of a year - goes to do a lot of good. But at heart, I suspect when you fill out a pledge form or write a check, you aren't deducting that amount from the TUS Budget.

Everything you see around you - all that we have done, all that we will do - happens because the members and friends of this institution choose to believe in the possibility such freedom generates. I suspect - or at least I hope - that there is something stirred in your heart [it may be a conscious or unconscious movement that may be strongly felt or perhaps just a momentary blip] when you give.

We treasure this community, yet we know that the greatest wealth is found not in what the world gives us but what we give to it. "Pledging" - making a commitment to support this congregation over the course of time - is an act of giving *and* receiving. It is part of an ongoing cycle of creativity and good - a small particle of generativity in our ever-unfolding inverse.

We give not out of guilt, but as an expression of hope, of gratitude. That's a bigger, grander, more loving and creative idea than simply supporting the budget.

Reverend John Wolfe minister emeritus of All Souls Unitarian in Tulsa, once said this:

"There is only one reason for being part of a Unitarian Universalist Church - or congregation - and that is to support it. You want to support it because it stands against superstition and fear.

Because this church points to what is noblest and best in human life. Because it is open to men and women of whatever race, creed, color, place of origin or sexual orientation.

"You want to support a Unitarian Universalist congregation because it has a free pulpit. Because you can hear ideas there that would cost any other minister his or her job.

"You want to support it because it is a place where your children are not saddled with guilt or [threatened with damnation]... where they can learn that religion is for joy, for comfort, for gratitude and love..."

Unitarian Universalist congregations all across this country will hold Sundays similar to this one. Ministers will say words not very different from ones I have uttered this sleepy morning. If we are in need of this faith, if we are fed by this religion and nurtured by this community, these people, then we will support this congregation.

Not because it is the one and only true religion - but because it is of the religion we believe in, that embodies our values and hopes, that provides a community of caring souls who share some basic outlooks with us, where the Sunday services and the special services and the Sunday School content - though we may disagree about this or that - basically all feel right to us.

We are at home. This is our home... there is room for improvement, restoration; regeneration and rejuvenation!

What are we waiting for? Let's go!