

## POINT OF TRANSFORMATION

A homily by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
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Five hundred years ago, in 1517, a monk named Martin Luther walked up to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany and nailed a list of 95 revolutionary ideas to it. His action sparked what came to be known as the Protestant Reformation. Luther's primary claim in his declaration on the door was that salvation is an individual matter, not an institutional one.

To that point in the history of the Christian Church, salvation was understood as coming to individual believers through the sacraments of communion and confession as administered by priests on behalf of the church. Luther drew a line straight from God to individual believers, cutting the church out of the process. On Luther's terms, confessing your sins directly to God brought immediate and full absolution directly from God.

Over the following decades and centuries, the idea that individuals matter more than anything else caught on like wildfire. If you extend the primacy of the individual to politics, you get democracy. If you extend it to economics, you get capitalism.

Given the evidence that's accumulating in our nation and world today, one could easily argue that it's time for a second reformation — one that confronts a culture in which individuals have primacy almost to the exclusion of everything else. Come to think of it, Donald Trump may well be both symbol and substance of what happens when extreme individualism gets set loose — psychologically, economically, and politically. Our current circumstances remind me of my very favorite poem title, penned by Tony Hoagland: "What Narcissism Means to Me."

At its best, Unitarian Universalism provides an antidote to extreme individualism, both religiously and politically. As people of faith and as citizens of our nation, we call for a sense of mutual responsibility — for each other, for our commonweal, and for the planet we call home. Perhaps the most revolutionary of our stated purposes and principles is the one committing us to respecting the interdependent web of all existence of which we are apart.

In this sense, Unitarian Universalism has more in common with Eastern religious traditions — Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, among others — than it does with the religions of the West. I'm deeply grateful to Shabnam Abedi and her musical colleagues, as well as to Alejandro, Renée, and the other members of our choir, for sharing with us today the classical music of the Hindustani tradition.

Satish Kumar, a Jain monk from India who has become an environmental activist, typifies the view that we are defined less by how we are different from everything around us than by how we are related to our surroundings. In one of his

essays, part of which served as one of our “Common Meditations for All Souls,” Kumar writes:

As a seed is capable of becoming a tree, all human beings are also capable of realizing their own full potential. In order for the seed to become a tree it must be planted in the soil, underground, in the dark, and almost forgotten. In relationship with the earth, the seed surrenders its separateness, its identity, its individuality, its ego. In fact, the seed allows itself to become one with the earth, only then its hidden energy bursts open and we see the green shoots emerging like a miracle. In the same way, we human beings have to let go of our pride, our separateness, and not bother about our individual identity. If we immerse ourselves in the process of life, and trust the process of the universe, and identify ourselves with others, we can become the tree of a thousand branches and a million plums. You do need a sense of the self; there is a place for it. Individuality and wholeness are complementary, not contradictory — like the seeds need the shell. Without the shell the seed is incapable of forming itself as a seed. Similarly, we humans have our identity giving us a sense of separateness, but a time comes when the seed needs to grow into a tree. That is a point of transformation. As the seed goes through transformation and realizes itself as a tree, the shell is no longer necessary and has to disintegrate in order for the seed to integrate with the other elements.

As Kumar points out, our relationships with the people and world around us aren't superficial or peripheral. They aren't add-ons to a self that somehow develops independently of them. Rather, our relationships make us who we are. Without them, we simply wouldn't exist. Our ability to fulfill our potential requires us not to separate ourselves from those around us, but rather to become one with them.

Besides, it's impossible to describe who I am without describing what I'm part of. I am made up of experiences — each of them uniquely mine — of my intimate partner, my immediate family, my colleagues at work, my friends in the community, as well as my casual acquaintances. In addition, I am made up of experiences of success and of failure — the triumphs I have enjoyed, as well as the losses I have suffered and the people I have hurt. Also, I am made up of experiences of an enchanting sunrise or a disconcerting sunset, the feel of warm air or the taste of cool water, the touch of a friend's comforting hand or a lover's enchanting kiss. These experiences and others like them create my self. Their real presence in my life — no, as my life — defines me.

The relationships that make us who we are extend even further — far beyond what is immediately present to us here and now. They also include our experience in its largest dimensions. We may get a hint of this vast universe of experience when we walk on the beach at dawn or lie in a meadow under the stars. Reflecting on our place in the

universe, we feel part of a vastly larger whole, and we somehow feel that everything is part of us. We feel as though the universe has come to consciousness in us. When this happens, we've entered into the ultimate spiritual experience, which is the experience of transcendence.

This experience ultimately takes in everything: the experience of all that is present in our lives and our world, as well as all that is past and all that is possible. Spiritual seekers throughout the ages have called this experience divine. In these moments, we become most fully alive.

For a seed, the point of transformation comes when the seed gives itself to the soil in order to become a tree. The seed has to give up something — its uniqueness, its separateness, and even its individuality. But look what happens: it becomes a tree — a tree of a thousand branches and million plums.

In a similar way, when we break through our shell and give ourselves fully to the people and world around us, we become part of everything and thereby play a part in everything. But we too have to give up something in order to realize our full potential. We have to let go of the myth that we should be self-sustaining and self-reliant. We have to let go of a way of life that tries to get ahead by leaving everyone else behind.

I'm keenly aware that this is generally more of a challenge for men in our culture than for women. An article yesterday in the online magazine Quartz, titled "In Praise of Selfish Women," observes that women in most cultures have been socialized to put other people's needs and concerns before their own. For this reason, the article goes on to say, it takes a healthy level of selfishness for many women to feel that they have a voice and something to say. Put differently, you need to recognize what kind of seed you are in order to know what kind of a tree you can become.

Whether recognizing your distinctive identity comes easily or hard, however, you have to get beyond the confines of your shell in order to become a tree. You have to move beyond what you can be on your own in order to embrace what you can be as part of the life that surrounds you. This is our calling and our challenge — as people of faith and as citizens of our nation and our world. When we respond to this calling, the miracle of growth starts to happen.