

“Transforming Conflict”

December 3, 2023

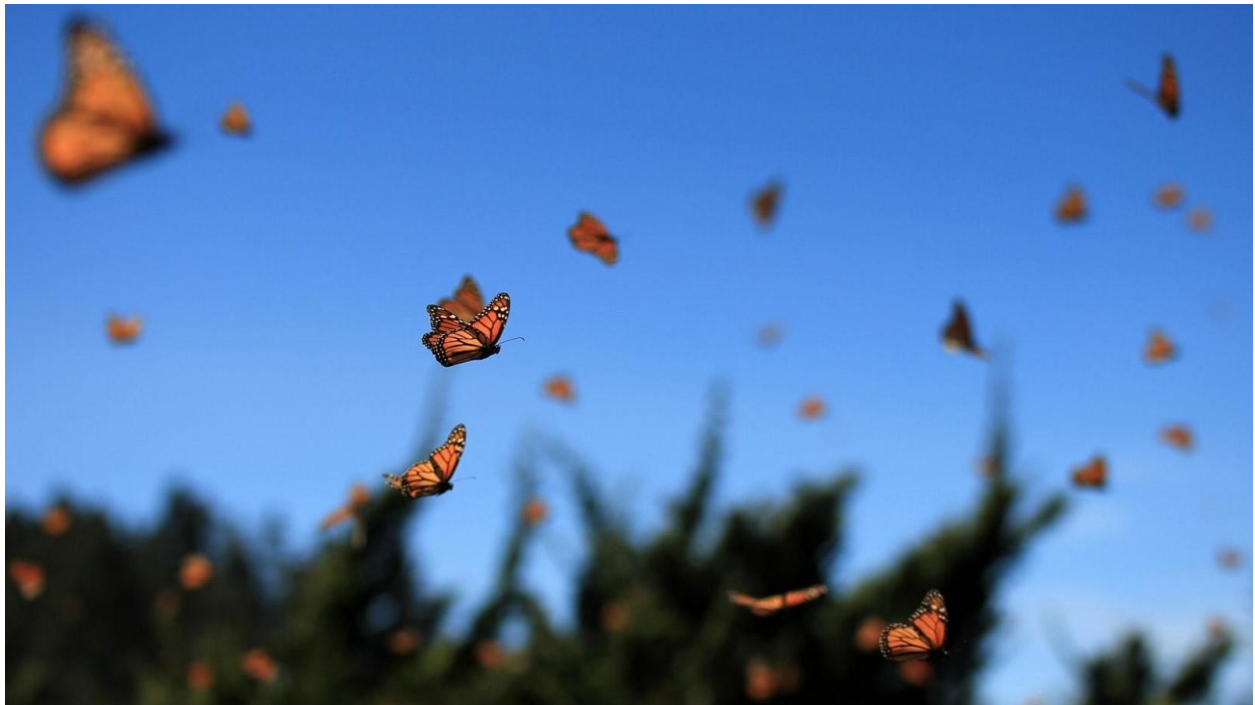
Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Rev. Mary Gear and Curtis Tanner

Reflection: Of Butterflies and Transformation

by Curtis Tanner

The spiritual theme for our OUUC Community for the month of December is Transformation.



The Worship Arts Team meets monthly with Rev. Mary, Troy, and others to reflect on our Worship Services, and to share images that reflect the monthly theme. When we came together to discuss transformation, we shared visions of butterflies as emblematic of transformation. For me, this resonates both with my head as a professional biologist and my heart as a Unitarian Universalist seeking to transform and be transformed.



Consider the wondrous mystery that is the transformation of a butterfly. This monarch egg was placed on this leaf by a winged adult female. She chose this spot to provide both shelter and nourishment for the caterpillar that will succeed her, carrying on the cycle of life and continuance of her species.



The larva emerges, undergoing metamorphosis, growing, maturing into a caterpillar.



The larva is gaining the strength needed to undergo their final transformation – from a caterpillar entombed in a chrysalis to an adult butterfly.



The beautiful monarch emerges, takes flight, mates, and the cycle continues.



What does this mystery of Nature hold for you? Can you remember a time when you too were transformed? The small steps from larvae to caterpillar to the emergence of a being reborn? What transformation are you preparing for in your life? Have you witnessed this transformation in others?



Now let us consider for a moment another facet of transformation often attributed to our beautiful, winged Monarch. Have you heard of the “Butterfly Effect? The term is closely associated with the work of mathematician and meteorologist Edward Norton Lorenz.



Lorenz noted that the butterfly effect is derived from the metaphorical example of the details of a tornado. How the exact time of formation, the exact path taken might be influenced by minor

perturbations such as a distant butterfly flapping their wings several weeks earlier. I'll spare you the lessons on chaos theory and the mathematical equations that scientists have developed to explore this theory. But it's a real thing that scientists discuss, argue, and spin off in new directions.



If a butterfly can flap her wings and perchance affect a future weather event in a distant place, then truly whatever we do can affect everything and everyone else, if even in the tiniest way. Nowhere does this truth seem more evident to me than in the ways we care for children.



The butterfly effect challenges us to imagine that even the smallest things we do can ripple across space and time. What if our acts of Loving Kindness brought a smile to a face we might not see? Know that the lessons you share can live on through the generations. Imagine taking a stand for justice that starts a thin crack in the walls of oppression.



Whether or not you ascribe to the theory of the butterfly effect in its literal sense, I believe we are called as Unitarian Universalists to live a life that bears witness to the truth that our actions, no matter how small, do matter. Have the faith to believe that you can make a difference. That we, the members and friends of OUUC, do make a positive difference in the larger community. Spread your beautiful wings. Turn your heart towards the light. Take flight and transform the world!

Reading I: Rev. Angel Kyodo Williams

None of these things actually helps us work through the conflict in a transforming way. If we try to win, control others, disappear from the conversation, or silence others, we lose the capacity to learn from the substance of the disagreement. We lose the potential creativity that might lie in discovering that our wants, needs, or convictions are not actually mutually exclusive after all. We miss the chance to clarify our values together, or to choose them in a time when that is hard. There is so much richness that we lose by cutting off the possibility of walking into and engaging conflict covenantally.

But what if it is possible to be in conflict and in covenant at the same time? What if it is possible to disagree – deeply, truly disagree – about things that really matter to us and still be in covenant all the way through the engagement and hopefully the resolution of that conflict? How would that change the way we show up in our conflicts?

Part I: Conflict and Covenant

Rev. Mary

A small and growing fellowship discusses whether to ask a minister to share ministry with them. A congregation talks about asking congregants to make financial pledges to support the church. A congregation growing in size thinks about designing and constructing a new church building. A congregation dedicated to service for those without homes discusses selling property that has been part of its mission for several years. A congregation with a long history of ministers considers asking a minister to stop serving them. During a global pandemic, a congregation decides whether to open its doors, when and to how many people, and if masks are required.

Each of these is an example of a conversation that happens regularly in congregations, all except the pandemic one, anyway. In fact, these conversations are examples from the history of this congregation. This community has learned from these discussions, consciously or not. These conversations and the resulting decisions changed the congregation, and they influence us now. What is also important is how the conversations happened, who was included and listened to, what was said and how, whether the relationships were sustained or broken. Those things also live on and influence us today, whether we say them out loud or not, and whether we are aware of them or not.

We might call these conversations and decision points conflict. I learned a definition of conflict from The Rev. Dr. Gil Rendle, a retired Methodist minister and congregational consultant. Rendle's favorite definition of conflict is this: when two or more ideas are in the same place at the same time. I appreciate the simplicity of this definition. I also appreciate that it is without judgment. There is no judgment about any of the multiple ideas that are present, and there is no judgment about the fact that multiple ideas even exist in the first place. It is a simple statement of reality. Conflict is when two or more ideas are in the same place at the same time.

We bring the judgment. We judge ideas different from ours, and we determine that the presence of multiple ideas is uncomfortable and therefore bad. We decide that ideas cannot coexist, we notice that there are feelings, even passions, and that we care about the outcome of the decision before us. That's when we try strategies like seeking to win, controlling others, disappearing from the conversation, or silencing or shutting down others.

We live in a culture that does not tolerate difference, so it does not equip us for conflict. Look at our national and international scene right now. We are ill equipped, so we are afraid and think something is wrong when conflict arises. What if we tried something different?

After all, nonviolent conflict is necessary for change. If we were never challenged, we would never grow spiritually or otherwise. If those conversations hadn't happened, this congregation may not have a minister or a building or financial support or even have survived Covid well. Growth requires conflict.

In her book on transforming conflict, UU minister Teresa Cooley suggests that evidence of conflict doesn't mean we've done something wrong but that we have something to learn. Imagine what might be different if we were taught that when we were children?

What Cooley suggests is that conflict is an opportunity, and most importantly an opportunity for justice and transformation. Cooley defines conflict transformation this way:

Conflict transformation is to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships.

Cooley normalizes conflict as part of the ebb and flow of life and reframes it as the chance to constructively change in ways that uphold our values and support life and relationships.

In her book, Cooley outlines the process of transforming conflict with two actions. First is the process of self-discernment and self-awareness. We ask questions like: what is my part in this drama? Instead of blaming others, what have I contributed? What are my values, goals, and motivations, and how are they showing up in this conflict?

Even though this process is internal, we don't have to do it alone. We can call on trusted others to help us by listening and reflecting what they hear. We might even invite feedback if we are open to it. We need not be alone in this self-reflection process.

The second part of conflict transformation is what Cooley calls “moving from me to we.” In this phase we take what we have learned about ourselves, and we seek to understand the other. We practice setting aside our story and biases to listen and converse to understand. With this practice, we learn that we can listen to a different idea without compromising our beliefs. Listening does not mean agreeing, it means seeking to understand. We can share our values and beliefs, then ask questions and listen to those that are different from ours.

Then, in congregational life, a decision will be made. Sometimes it will be made by congregational leaders, sometimes by a democratic vote or other means of decision making. And it is rarely the case that everyone agrees, especially in a congregation. The hoped-for outcome is not that everyone agrees, but that everyone is heard. And in a spiritually mature congregation, the expectation is that everyone is heard and once a decision is made, everyone works to implement that decision even if they disagree.

That’s where our covenant comes in. We are a faith tradition that is united by the covenants that we make, not by sharing the same beliefs. That’s what we mean when we say we are a covenantal faith not a creedal faith. Our belonging does not require that we believe the same things, but that we share values and agree how we will be together. Our agreement about how we will be together is our covenant.

After the service today, our forum will be about making changes to OUUC’s current covenant and adding a behavioral covenant. The forum will offer the chance to continue a process that we started last Fall by reviewing the proposed changes and having small group discussions about covenant.

OUUC’s current covenant says this about conflict (and this part we are not proposing to change):

Because we recognize that conflict is normal, we promise to...

...speak with each other directly and honestly from a position of respect, kindness and love, recognizing that to do so, there will be times we need to seek counsel from the community.

Our congregational covenant invites us to conflict transformation. It recognizes that conflict happens—remember: two or more ideas in the same place at the same time, necessary for growth. With this covenant we make a promise to each other about how we will be together when we are in conflict.

I learned to change my language about covenant recently. I used to say that we need a behavioral covenant so that we know when we are out of covenant. What I learned is that we can be in conflict and in covenant at the same time. In fact, it’s essential that we are in covenant when we are in conflict. Our covenant is the container that holds us when we have more than two ideas in the same place at the same time. The covenant is how we agree to be together when we disagree. The only time we are out of covenant is when we remove ourselves from the covenant and the community.

Now I say that we need a behavioral covenant so we are clear about how we promise to behave with each other, including when we are in conflict.

So, what if we were to see congregational conflict as an opportunity to live into our covenant, to transform ourselves and transform our community?

Reading II: Rev. Teresa Cooley from her book Transforming Conflict: The Blessings of Congregational Turmoil

Isn't this exactly what we are trying to create in our religious communities: a space in which a person can find themselves anew, in which they can reconnect with a loving community, and help everyone learn a new way of being. And religious communities are exactly the kinds of places where the "magic ratio" of human connection can take place, thereby changing the person, the community, and I believe, the world. Transformation.

Part II: Transformation Rev. Mary

The process in which a caterpillar becomes a butterfly is a process of transformation. A caterpillar makes a chrysalis and then dissolves, literally disintegrating and becoming goo, before it re-forms and emerges as a butterfly. The process of transformation is not a process of improvement, it is a process of change. The caterpillar doesn't emerge from the chrysalis as a better caterpillar; it emerges as something totally different.

Our spiritual theme for the month of December is transformation. It is one of Unitarian Universalism's core values, identified by a deep and wide process to clarify who UU's are in this evolving world. I read the definition of this value as our opening words today:

Transformation. We adapt to the changing world.

We covenant to collectively transform and grow spiritually and ethically.

The last sentence is important because it mentions covenant. This definition of transformation is part of the proposed changes to the UU Association's covenant, the agreement that UUA member congregations make when they join the association. OUUC is a member of the UU Association, along with 973 other congregations around the US. In June at our annual General Assembly, we will vote on these proposed changes, including covenanting to be open to growth and change spiritually and ethically, and agreeing to support each other as we do so.

Both OUUC and the UUA are revisiting our covenant right now, something that we commit to do regularly as we grow and change. And, there's a lot of change happening these days. If we are committed to growth and change, and conflict is necessary for growth and change, well then, perhaps we can learn to be better at transforming conflict. Columnist David Brooks suggests that we don't need to disagree less, we need to learn to disagree better.

If Covid taught us nothing else, I hope we've learned that we are always in the goo of transformation. In the real world, all stages of the transformation process exist—there are caterpillars, chrysalises, and butterflies all at the same time. And so it is with congregations. We have butterflies, wonderful and beautiful transformations we've experienced, like supporting online participation in our community. We have chrysalises, things in process, waiting to emerge, needing some time and attention, like our proposed covenant changes. And there are caterpillars, waiting to begin, waiting for recognition, like the big question of whether we want to intentionally grow.

We are always in process, as individuals and as a community, not what we once were and not what we can be. Being in the goo means that there is possibility. The choir today sang of two butterflies, singing: It's your time to grow, fall apart, reunite, don't be afraid in a world that never stops changing; let the walls come down and don't hold on too tight.

And isn't that the purpose of a congregation? A place where we can be held in a loving community and in covenant as we learn and grow. We transform ourselves so that we may transform the world. Journalist and writer Krista Tippett wrote: We create transformative, resilient new realities by becoming transformed, resilient people.

Spiritually mature people and congregations can not only tolerate difference, but they welcome it and learn the skills of conflict transformation. They know that choosing to be in a faith community means expecting to be transformed. They know that we all bring here our deepest values, our most vulnerable hurts, our tender aspirations, so of course sometimes they will collide with other people's values, and hurts and aspirations. This process of transformation is what we call faith development or spiritual deepening; in the Christian tradition it is called discipleship. No matter what we call it, we commit to discern our values and live them in community and in the world. What we do in here is what we take out there.

For the past few months, we have been exploring OUUC's history and there are some tender points that some have asked to revisit, including how we were impacted by Covid. The Healthy Congregations Team and I are committed to offering supportive restorative circles for those conversations to happen. This community is also in the process of exploring our covenant, the container that holds us when we are together in agreement and in conflict. The Healthy Congregations Team and I are committed to creating circles for those discussions, too, like we are doing today. It takes all of us to engage with these big questions of who we are and who we aspire to be. I hope you will add your voice to the song that we create together.

As we move into this month of darkness and wonder, may we see opportunity in the goo, may we be open to growth, and may we be transformed and transformative.