

Waiting for this Moment to Arise

A sermon by Jackie Clement

Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington Normal, IL

April 8, 2018

On December 7, 1999, I was sitting at my basement computer writing an email when I received my call to ministry. Not what would seem to be a really romantic call narrative—in the basement, writing emails. But there you are. In the single most numinous, brilliant moment of clarity and joy, my world and my life path changed.

My friend Ellen received her call while washing dishes. Again, not the most romantic of moments, but she describes it as the breath of God blowing through her. If I were more of a theist I would probably say the same because it captures for me that extraordinary feeling of having stepped, if only for a moment, outside of ordinary time and into liminal space.

However described, what Ellen and I and millions of others experienced is an archetype known in biblical studies as the call narrative. All the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures had them, a moment of commissioning when the God of their people sent them out to deliver a message to humanity. Call narratives have a very well defined structure. It starts with a situation of crisis, and God commissioning the prophet to a particular task. And then the prophet says, “Nope. Sorry. You got the wrong guy. I think you meant Harry over there by the tabernacle.” Moses tried to wiggle out of confronting Pharaoh at least 5 times. Jonah ended up in the belly of a whale trying avoid delivering the bad news to Ninevah. Jeremiah, Gideon, they all tried to slip away unnoticed, but, always, God overcomes the prophet’s reluctance by offering reassurance and a sign that the mission is a holy one.

The call narratives of modern ministers are surprisingly similar to those written 3000 years ago. Sure, I know some people who sat down and did an assessment of their skills and interests and how those aligned with the professions available to them and consciously chose ministry. But most of my friends report something very akin to the biblical call narrative of ancient prophets, and one of the pieces that seems so very common is the “Nope. Not me.” moment. Lots and lots of ministers fight against this calling for years before they give in and accept the reassurance and sign that the mission is really theirs. And I don’t think that reluctance really has anything to do with ministry. It has to do the power and world changing nature of spiritual transformation.

Not all of us will receive a call to ministry, but we are all subject to those transformative moments when the world drops away and we are changed forever. And while that can be an amazing joyous, even euphoric, experience, it can also be a very uncomfortable place to be. No matter what your particular transformation is calling you into, it’s going to radically alter your world. Annie Dillard put it this way, though she writes from a specifically Christian context:

Why do we people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The

churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake some day and take offense, or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return.

“The waking God may draw us out to where we can never return.” But this very possibility is why we come here. If you’ve been listening to me preach for any length of time you’ve probably heard me say that the purpose of religion is to help us make meaning of our lives and of the world. However, if you heard me preach for awhile you’ve probably heard me say that the purpose of religion is transformation. That’s not because I am mercurial, subject to sudden or unpredictable changes of mind, though I certainly can be. It’s because religion has multiple purposes, both making meaning *and* transformation. Religion has many other functions in the world besides these two but, to me, these seem to be the fundamental building blocks.

These two purposes of making meaning and transformation are equally important, though they are quite different from each other. Making meaning is about the individual spiritual quest. It is about how I see myself as a separate person in the context of all that is. It’s about my experience, my understanding, my worldview. One of the tenets of Unitarian Universalism is the free search for truth and meaning based on individual reason and personal experience. This aspect of our religious lives calls us to build a solid foundation of “I, me, my.” What are my values and what do I believe? To search for meaning, to construct a sense of your personal theology requires a good footing in the self.

All religions strive to provide this. Not just Unitarian Universalism, but *all* religions seek to ground us in the possibility that we can be good, moral people doing good, moral things in the world. Though religions differ significantly in their views of human nature, they all assure us that under the right conditions we have the capacity for goodness. As Ken Wilber writes, religion “offers myths and stories and tales and narratives and rituals and revivals, that, taken together, help the separate self make sense of, and endure, the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” Religion is about making meaning.

But religion is also about the call narrative, about transformation, and for many religions, certainly for Unitarian Universalism, transformation is not at all about the separate self. It’s almost the opposite. True spiritual transformation in many, maybe most, religious traditions is about shattering the self. It is not about building the ego with assurances that we are good and moral people. It is more about letting go of the illusion of ego and individual. It is about breaking out of the concept that the self is at all separate. Transformation catapults us into recognition of the shared sacredness of all existence. It is the communal up against the individual, and it requires us to let go of “I, me, my.” To return to Ken Wilber, spiritual transformation “does not fortify the separate self, but utterly shatters it—not consolation but devastation, not entrenchment but emptiness, not complacency but explosion, not comfort but revolution—in short, not a conventional bolstering of consciousness but a radical transmutation and transformation at the deepest seat of consciousness itself.”

This does not sound like a radically comfortable thing, and Franciscan Friar Richard Rohr agrees. In his book *Falling Upward*, Rohr talks about transformation as “second half of life religion,” which has nothing to do with age and everything to do with radical spiritual liberation: transformation. If I hadn’t left my copy of the book in a Boston hotel I would read you Rohr’s own words, but he says that the transformation into second half of life religion is usually precipitated by suffering when “God or life destabilizes your private ego.” He says that it can feel like dying because it shatters the conception of the self you knew so you can be born to your True Self, in capital letters. In a blog post, Rohr writes, “The True Self is all about right relationship, not requirements. It’s not about being correct; it’s about being connected, which you always were—you just didn’t realize it.”

People have been experiencing and writing about this kind of radical spiritual transformation for thousands of years. The biblical call narrative became an archetype not because it happened to a handful of divinely inspired prophets in ancient Israel, but because it happens to us regular folks all the time, through all of history and all over the world. And because our experiences so closely mirror each other—crisis, transformation, doubt, reassurance, liberation. The process may not be linear. The process may take moments or years. It may come as a bolt out of the blue or creep up on us slowly. But the process of spiritual transformation seems to always share a couple of characteristics: it can’t be scheduled on the calendar and it’s going to sting a little.

We’ve already heard from Wilber and Rohr why this process is painful – because it shatters the ego’s concept of self, because it is destabilizing, and requires a new worldview. There are other reasons as well. A new path necessarily entails loss of the old path. Following my calling into ministry meant that some of my friends stopped talking to me, even someone who had been a friend for 25 years. It meant ditching a 20-year career and starting from scratch at the age of 42.

But for all that the joy so far outweighs the loss. Spiritual transformation isn’t to be avoided because it’s gonna smart a little. The benefits are far greater than the risks. Dave Shanahan, one of our newest members, offered me a metaphor this past week that I think is useful here. Dave describes having kids as driving down the highway at 40 miles an hour with a boat anchor in the back seat when suddenly you open the door and heave the anchor out. Your car is going to change direction. You cannot tell ahead of time where it’s going to end up pointing, but you can be pretty sure it’s going to be different from where you thought you were headed. And for all that, people would not give up the joy of having children. That’s spiritual transformation right there. It can be unsettling and confusing and it might just scare the heck out of you, but, boy, is it worth it.

Dave’s metaphor also highlights the other thing that seems to be a given about spiritual transformation – you can’t really plan it. You can’t really be sure what direction it will leave you headed toward. You can’t schedule it or insist on it or buy it. It isn’t available in books or seminars. It’s not to be found in desert retreats or on remote mountain tops or even in church. It’s not on Amazon.com and it’s not summoned by candles or incense or bells.

All we can do is invite it in. We can take the steps to inch our way toward it. We can prepare and remain open to the idea. But we can’t force it to happen. Spiritual practice and making meaning, all the myths and stories and tales and narratives and rituals and revivals and retreats, these

prepare us for the transformation; these open us to the point where transformation can take place; but they don't ensure transformation. They don't cause it to happen.

So this how I began my mediation practice. Liz Gilbert's bestselling book *East, Pray, Love* contains a scene where she is just cranky and resistant to continuing a meditation practice even though she is living in an ashram in India. She finds the will to keep going because she is drawn by the image of kundalini shakti. Kundalini shakti is the life force, the divine spiritual power that lives within each of us. In Hinduism, it is depicted as a tightly coiled snake that resides at the base of the spine and through meditation or other spiritual practices the snake uncoils and rises upward toward the thousand-petalled lotus on top of the head. In the book Gilbert described it as a beam of pure blue light rising along your spine and shooting out the top of your head. And I decided right then and there I would learn to meditate because a beam of blue light shooting out of the top of my head was not something I was going to miss in life.

Now if you have ever undertaken a mediation practice you know that doing it so you can get blue light to shoot out of your head almost guarantees that blue light will never ever shoot out of your head. It just doesn't work that way. Indeed, in the meditation classes I've taken, they taught us the futility of trying to force any particular thing to happen. There was one woman who desperately wanted to see Lord Shiva. Not gonna happen. I want blue light to shoot out of my head. Not gonna happen. You meditate and what happens, happens. As you continue to practice and if you work at deepening your practice *something* will happen. You just don't get to say what. Still, every time I get sick of my meditation practice, I hold on to the possibility that transformation might show up. Someday the snake might reach the lotus blossom. Someday light might shoot out of my head.

As much as we desire liberation and as much as we undertake the spiritual practices that will help us move closer to transformation, one thing to know is that when transformation happens it might just be while we're washing the dishes or writing an email. So keep showing up, keep doing the work and always keep a crash helmet handy. Because you never know which moment will be a moment of liberation.

Namaste. Por lo tanto puede ser.

© 2018 Jacqueline R. Clement. All rights reserved.