

"Change, Antidotes, and Transmogrifiers"

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<http://firstunitarian.org/podcasts/assembly-april-21-antidotes-transmogrifiers-and-change/>

The reading was an excerpt from "For Religion to be Significant," by Rev. Mark Belletini. <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/for-religion-to-be-significant>

One of the great things about the Unitarian Universalist and humanist traditions is that you get to pick your own gospels. It's part of that free and responsible search for truth and meaning. And one of my gospels is the Gospel of Calvin and Hobbes.

For those who may not be familiar, I am not talking about John Calvin, the Protestant reformer who liked to burn Unitarians at the stake. Nor am I talking about Thomas Hobbes, the 17th century English philosopher, with whom we have significantly more in common. Rather, I'm talking about Calvin and Hobbes the comic strip, which ran for 10 years in 2,400 newspapers around the world.

The strip depicted the adventures of a precocious 6-year-old boy named Calvin and his ever-present sidekick, a surprisingly eloquent stuffed tiger named Hobbes. I am the lucky owner of "The Complete Calvin and Hobbes," a four-book, fourteen-hundred page collection of all the strips. And these days, after long hours of consuming too much news coverage, I'll read a few pages of comics for a dose of levity right before bed. The strips are rich in satire and social commentary and dry-witted family members, and these are a few of my favorite things. This fall I'm hoping to teach a Sunday class exploring the theological and philosophical concepts found in Calvin and Hobbes. But today, because our theme is change, I want to focus on just one recurring element of the series: The Transmogrifier.

To you and to me and to Calvin's parents, the Transmogrifier may look like a cardboard box with some writing on it. But we adults have such limited vision. For Calvin, the Transmogrifier is a device that can transform any object (usually Calvin), into something else entirely, with just the turn of a dial and a quick "Zap." Calvin's original Transmogrifier had four settings – eel, baboon, bug, and dinosaur.



Pondering these options, the ever-thoughtful Hobbes had a question. "What if you want to be something else?" he asked. "No problem," Calvin says, "I left some room. Whatever you want to be, just write it in."

They proceed to play with the Transmogrifier, and soon Calvin has turned himself into a tiger, just like Hobbes. He complains of how hot he is now that he's covered in feline fur, and he discovers that he's suddenly much hungrier. And Calvin becomes quite agitated with his long-suffering parents, who somehow fail to notice that he has become a tiger.

The Transmogrifier is the dream of many a kid, and its appeal tells us much about human reality, and humanity's relationship to change. That relationship is frequently a binary one – either we really want change, or we really don't.

Either rip the Band-Aid off, or leave it on. But don't drag it out. With its literally incredible capabilities, the Transmogrifier speaks to long-held human hopes for quick changes, for magic wands and magic potions, for elixirs and fountains of youth, for shortcuts to becoming the next great thing.

But for all the fun that readers may have watching Calvin turn into a tiger or a frog or back into Calvin, you and I know the truth of the Transmogrifier. At the end of the day, we know that Calvin's parents are reasonable and right. Calvin did not actually zap his way to tigersdom. Transformation rarely comes that easily.

Change and transformation are good topics for us right now because they are on a lot of people's minds. We Americans have been seeing changes going on all around us at a dizzying and often terrifying speed for half a year now. We have no map indicating at what point the road will finally smooth out or when it might bend back even slightly to the left. Six months ago, when we gathered here on the Sunday after the election, we knew that our country would not be changing for the better, and we acknowledged it. We were naming the reality that we all knew we were facing. We named it to make it more real for all of us, to help it sink in, to help us begin to figure out the serious tasks ahead. As much as we may have wanted to, we couldn't just drop the country into the Transmogrifier. Hard work was ahead.

In some ways, that hard work has not been so much about change as about preservation – trying to rescue things like people's health insurance, or the natural world we all live in. The earth and many of the people on it have been in need of healing for a long time; sometimes, activism is about trying to leave that Band-Aid in place while others try to rip it off. Struggling to keep the world from backsliding off a

cliff can feel less joyful than moving the world onward and upward. But there is a silver lining to seeking justice while in rescue mode.

In times of slow but general progress, people with relatively comfortable lives tend to sit on the sidelines and not worry much about the world's advancement. That's actually one way to define privilege – the privilege to do nothing, because you and the people you're closest to are already fine. The upside of the ongoing crisis that we find ourselves in is that it has been motivating and activating a much bigger portion of the population. People who don't want their health situation or their financial situation to change for the worse are having to change their priorities in order to speak up and show up. More Americans are finding themselves in the same boat as it takes on stunning amounts of water. It's terrible news, yet it's bringing people together and firing them up in new ways. In the words of the Australian indigenous artist Lilla Watson, "If you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

Knowing that personal change is often required for societal transformation, a question I've been asking myself has been this: Have I changed myself enough? Maybe some of you have been asking this, too, with all that's going on. Have I changed my life enough in response to the attempts to destroy so much of what is good in our state and in our country?

When considering such questions, I find myself mindful of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," in which he sees middle-of-the-road white people as the greatest obstacle to justice. My own personal politics, worldview, and theological orientation are all fairly far outside of the mainstream. But my day-to-day life is admittedly comfortable, and inertia around justice is a constant temptation.

MLK addresses this privilege, this tendency to favor a self-serving keeping of order over a wider, more inclusive justice. If I have all the right analyses and radical ideas, but I don't change myself or anything around me, I become the kind of obstacle that King was talking about. I become what he was wary of and weary of, and what many of his successors have rightfully run out of patience for.

One of those successors is an African-American activist named Hari Ziyad, who got tired of being asked whether racial-justice activists hated white people. Ziyad did not hate white people, but finally just [gave up and started answering yes](#). Here's part of Ziyad's explanation to those white people who can't let go of systems that harm black people: "I hate your fake concern for my well-being that reaches its limits as soon as it asks you to make a change or be uncomfortable.... I hate the way you continue to go

about your day while we die. I hate the way we die. And I am no longer afraid to say it.”

“I hate the way you continue to go about your day while we die.” Ziyad is speaking to white Americans about black Americans. But he could have been speaking to all Americans about Jews during the Holocaust, or he could be speaking to most of the world right now about Syria. There’s a lot of tragedy in the world, and a lot of people going about their day.

The truth is we get some very mixed messages about this kind of thing in our culture. In the face of crisis, we’re often told that we’re supposed to keep calm and carry on. If you do anything differently, it means that the terrorists or the bad guys are winning. Going about your day is cast as heroic.

There’s some truth to this. If I let this toxic presidency make me a more dour, less trusting, more fearful person, those are not changes that help anybody. And for a lot of people, just getting through daily life is heroic. If you’ve got a houseful of kids or a new baby or a partner or parent who needs a lot of care, if you’re working multiple jobs to survive in the so-called “gig economy,” if you’re struggling with your own health – you may not have the capacity right now to help save the world. Or maybe your activism is already at full capacity, with no healthy, realistic way to add any more. Going about your day *is* saving the world.

But among people who do have some capacity, a bit of free time, enough money, I do worry that there’s a lot of business as usual that is helping authoritarianism to tighten its hold. When I look at my own calendar, I have just as many vacation days planned this year as last. Next year or five years from now, will I think that was the right thing to have done? (I’m already thinking that in 2018, particularly in the fall, I’ll need to use my time differently.)

Downtime is important, family time is important, art and leisure are important, especially for those people who have long immersed themselves in the work. But to help our country, a country that’s never been in this place before, a country poised to let tens of thousands of people get sick and die each year, a country gravely endangered by incompetence and greed – how much are we truly compelled to change, about our lives and ourselves?

There is no one answer to this question. This question has only individual answers. It’s another part of that free and responsible search for truth and meaning. And to answer

that question it's helpful to have an understanding of what your underlying values are around being changed and being a force for change.

Your theological and philosophical orientation, for example, may be one of the things that compels you toward change. And in fact the main principles of today's humanism do call on humanists to take part in changing the world. For example, [the third Humanist Manifesto](#), written in 2003, has this to say:

Humanists long for and strive toward a world of mutual care and concern, free of cruelty and its consequences, where differences are resolved cooperatively without resorting to violence. ... Working to benefit society maximizes individual happiness. ... We seek to minimize the inequities of circumstance and ability, and we support a just distribution of nature's resources and the fruits of human effort so that as many as possible can enjoy a good life.

We can also turn to humanists of the past for guidance. Our own John Dietrich, who came to this congregation as its minister 100 years ago, wrote the following in a 1934 pamphlet called "Humanism":

If we live in a great impersonal universe with no friend to guide, it matters tremendously how we conduct ourselves, for we are actually the makers of human destiny. We are not simply individuals who have a beginning in life and an ending. We are links in the endless chain of life. To us has been committed all that life has won from chaos in all the ages past. Only through us can that trust from the past be transmitted to the future.

Consumed as we may be with the current situation, Dietrich's words remind us of the timelessness to which we are connected, as both heirs and ancestors. Our actions and choices are not only important in this moment, but they also echo on for generations. And Dietrich's words help us remember the distinction between humanism and the concepts of atheism and agnosticism. Atheism and agnosticism are valuable and valid systems for thinking about the world, but they can glorify negation or get stuck in neutral; today's humanism offers more systematic guidance for how to live your life.

This brings up one of the more significant challenges to personal change in humanistic communities. That challenge is thinking. Now, do not get me wrong. I am strongly in favor of thinking. Our whole country would be different right now if more Americans were better at thinking things through.

That said, some approaches to thinking and learning can actually be obstacles to personal and societal change. For one thing, some actions can't fully be thought through – if you're in a situation with no parallel, it may not be possible to imagine every outcome. Such a level of uncertainty may lead to inaction. And regardless of the situation, there can always be more to think about, which can mean that the thinking never stops and the action never starts. Thinking and learning for their own sakes are of course valuable and fulfilling. But if they are all that happen – if we only *read* about Syria – then aren't we just going about our day? Are we being true to our deepest values?

Back at my seminary – also David's seminary and Jane's seminary – the professors used to talk about how we Unitarian Universalists tended to try to think our way into new ways of acting, and how we miss out on the value of acting our way into new ways of thinking. In other words, our professors encouraged us to go ahead with experiences that fit our values framework even if we didn't know the outcome, and then to let those experiences inform our thinking, rather than letting our thinking limit our experiences. There is great appeal to the life of the mind – it is, in general, much safer than acting. You don't have to involve other people, or even leave the house. I'm reminded of the old joke that Unitarians would choose a discussion of heaven over heaven itself. But change in the world, and growth of the self, require more than thinking and discussion.

This congregation has had something of a complex relationship with the interplay between thought and change. Members here always have been interested in learning new things, and they have a long history of social action. But the idea of personal change is more of a mixed bag. In a congregational survey from 2012, shortly before David was called as senior minister, members here were asked to list the benefits of coming to FUS on a Sunday morning. They could pick more than one. The top answer, at 81%, was "enlightenment." Much farther down the list, at 40%, was "transformation." This strikes me as very curious. *I want to get smarter, but I'm not sure I want to change.* Here's your focus question for coffee hour – "have you really been enlightened if you haven't been transformed?" Thinking is different from learning, of course, and transformation is more intense than change. But all this does bring to mind the challenges of becoming the people the world needs right now. Because for the most part, being the people we have been – and I include myself in this – being the people we have been, and doing the things we have done, got us to where we are today. It's a fine line to walk, affirming our worth and dignity, yet ever striving to be something more.

That's part of the reason I chose the reading we heard from the Rev. Mark Belletini, about how we do not exist to surpass others. Atheism, agnosticism, and even

humanism can have strong supersessionist streaks. In other words, they can exude a sense that they are better than other, previous belief systems. As David has said from this podium, it's important to add the phrase "for you" – they're better *for you* than other belief systems. A nontheistic humanist worldview is not some universal pinnacle, or the inevitable result of the march of progress. And the work of communities such as ours, in Belletini's words, "is not to be competitive with others, and to find ways to supersede others, but rather to find ways to supersede ourselves, to grow beyond our limitations and our constrictive boundaries, each and every one of us."

It's challenging to be our best selves in any time, and especially right now, when so many leaders and citizens are embodying the worst traits human beings can have. Part of what we do here within these walls is to help each other become who we want to be, and to ask important questions together. It's part of how we are gifts to each other. In the words of one of the respondents to that congregational survey, "I attend FUS so that I can be the best citizen of humanity."

So as we head back into the fray that our country has become, may we figure out how to change and how to grow to live out our highest ideals. May we accept the hard work of doing so. May we become the right people for these times, and the people we want to be. May we make it so.