

First Unitarian Church

April 14, 2024

Welp. I'm going to start with the bad news. We can't change other people. So, if you saw this sermon title and thought, *Great! "We've" been working on changing my spouse...* You're out of luck. Usually when one person tries to change another, the other person- who is the way they are for a reason- does not appreciate that.

We do influence each other though. There's a saying in Spanish, *Dime con quién andas y te diré quién eres*. Tell me who you hang out with and I'll tell you who you are.

A study from Pew Research Center showed that people who are actively involved in a religious congregation tend to be happier and more civically engaged than people who are not.<sup>i</sup> They are more likely to vote and more likely to volunteer in organizations beyond the church. They are less likely to smoke or drink than the general population. The research didn't get into why these things are correlated. Correlation does not equal causation. But we do know that humans are social creatures who influence one another through culture and group norms. And since I know y'all don't do everything I say, I have to assume you're having a positive influence each other.

That influence only works though if a person wants it to. *They* decide to change. The person we have the most influence over is ourselves. When we change ourselves, it might influence others, or it might not.

What would you like to work on changing about yourself? Maybe: Be more compassionate. Or let go of a bad habit. Become more assertive. Act with more courage. Express your emotions more. Do less masking- you wish others knew you. Maybe you want to take charge of your life- you are tired of feeling helpless.

Change occurs when we have the desire, ability, reasons, commitment, and readiness. Desire: we want to. It isn't because someone else wants us to. Ability: we have the power to. There are some things we can't change. I will never make it to 5'1". It has to be something you can control. Reasons: they are linked with desire, but not the same. We can have reasons for changing, but if we don't have the desire, it may not go very far. Commitment: we have to see it through.

Readiness: sometimes it turns out we didn't have those things yet after all, or it's too hard. We may not be ready yet. Or maybe we change a little, and then later when we are more ready, we change more.

I'm going to tell you a couple of stories. First: James Doty.

James Doty had it rough as a kid. His father was an alcoholic. His mother was extremely depressed, to the point of not functioning as a parent. He faced food insecurity, and unstable housing. He got in fights. After one of his teeth was knocked out and his parents couldn't afford to fix it, he tried never to smile anymore.

In the summer of 1968, James wandered into a magic shop. He was looking for a plastic thumb. That day, the shop owner's mother happened to be there. She was in town visiting. Ruth had big "earth mother" vibes. She had a radiant smile and flowing gray hair and was wearing a muumuu. (This was the sixties, remember, they were cool then. And they are back again now!)

Ruth and James got into a conversation about why magic tricks work. She told him,

“The brain, as busy as it can be, is actually very lazy” — that this is why magic tricks work. “And, yes, magic works because people are so easily distracted.” But she said, “they’re not distracted by hand gestures. Most people who are watching a magic show aren’t really there watching the magic show. They are regretting something they did yesterday, or worrying about something that might happen tomorrow, so they’re not really at the magic show to begin with. So how could they see the plastic thumb at all?”<sup>ii</sup>

I don’t know what Ruth’s background was, but her words sound a lot like the teachings of Buddhism, and the 1960s are the decade when American Zen Buddhism was a rapidly growing movement.

Up until then James had felt like a passenger in his life. Not in control. He felt “like a leaf being blown by an ill wind,” he says. “I had no control over anything, and events would happen, and I couldn’t do anything about them. I felt, and I think it was, in fact, reality, that at that point, when I met her, I had limited to no possibilities.” Ruth offered to teach him meditation techniques over the next several weeks that she would be in town.

He agreed. Why not?

She taught him to use body relaxation techniques to calm his mind. (We do those most Sundays in our meditation time). Ruth taught him to practice compassion toward himself and others, and to visualize what he wanted and to set intentions.

He started to see his life through new eyes. Which caused him to start responding differently to it. Which changed his path. He ended up going to college, and then medical school.

Eventually, James Doty became a brain surgeon. He’s now a clinical professor of neurosurgery at Stanford University. He also co-founded and directs Stanford’s Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education.

His memoir is called *Into the Magic Shop: A Neurosurgeon’s Quest to Discover the Mysteries of the Brain and the Secrets of the Heart*.

James had a desire and reasons to change. He was miserable and felt hopeless. Ruth offered him help with the ability to do so by changing his mindset. He made a commitment when he agreed to meet with her for those six weeks and he followed through. And over time, his new ability helped him be ready to seek out the opportunities that he wanted.

One thing neuroscience has demonstrated is that brains change. All throughout our lives, they have a quality called plasticity. Brains can change for the worse, as when trauma rewires us. But they can change for the better, as when we heal from that. Or when we learn a new skill. Or when we develop intentions and practices that lead us toward where we want to go, how we want to change, who we want to become.

What we practice, we become.

That is another of the ways we change. James Doty’s story involves him changing his brain through those new practices he learned from Ruth.

Another way people change is when we grow more fully into who we are. We can become more aligned or integrated, so that the self we wear on the outside matches the self on the inside. Or a self we were afraid to show, or it wasn't possible to show, finally gets to shine.

Next story: Cecilia Gentili.

Cecilia grew up in the small town of Galvez in Argentina. By the time she began elementary school, she knew that although everyone around her referred to her as a boy, she was actually a girl.

Although Cecilia was a very young child, and although she did not know other people like her yet, she had no doubt about who she was. She just knew.

Other people could also tell that she was different. In the second week of school, when she had been using the girls' restroom, her teacher did not accuse her of trying to cause trouble. Instead, Cecilia was called into the principal's office, where a psychologist, a psychiatrist, the teacher, and her mother had all gathered. They pointed to some anatomical charts on a wall. Then they told her she had choose which bathroom to use based on a part of her no one else would see, not on who she was.

She knew she had to go along with the adults or face big trouble, so she went along as much as she could. Luckily, there was one person who did not expect her to hide who she was: her grandmother, Abu, whom Cecilia loved. Abu would let Cecilia come over and wear her jewelry and clothes. She loved and accepted Cecilia. And Abu stood up for her. Cecilia would never forget that, her whole life. It meant the world to her.

Cecilia was a master of survival. She was quick witted and quick to read people. She was a keen observer of human nature and of the culture that tried to contain and punish her for being different. But there was no place for her trans self there. There was no work available beyond sex work due to the prejudices of those around her, and that wasn't safe. She couldn't stay. So, Cecilia left for the US.

It was a brutal transition. Here she was not only trans, but undocumented. She was arrested and incarcerated. I'm not going to go into that—it's too awful, and it's not the point. The part of her story that I want to lift up is what comes next. After she got out, she went to the Center, a community hub for LGBTQ people in New York City. There, mentors showed her how to write a resume. With that, she got a job at a community health center as an HIV peer navigator. Then she moved up and became the trans health program coordinator. She managed a clinic that started out with four patients and grew to 500. She was excellent at her work. She was smart, passionate, and dedicated to her patients' welfare.

She developed skills for policy work, too. She became the managing policy director of an advocacy organization, got laws passed to protect trans people and got laws repealed that targeted trans people. She was also one of two lead plaintiffs in a successful lawsuit against the Trump administration. She wrote and performed in two one-woman plays, and wrote a book, her memoir, called *Faltas*. Her memoir is brilliant, gorgeous, painful, and funny.

Cecilia's story is one of change. The change isn't a gender transition. She knew who she was from the beginning. It's a story about becoming more herself. It's a story of moving from hiding

and suppressing and trying to be invisible because she had to, to letting her light shine and finding her power and using it. And loving. By the time she died last year, Cecilia had become like a mom to hundreds and hundreds of gay and trans people. At her funeral they called her their mother.

*Dime con quién andas y te diré quién eres?* How about: *Dime a quién quieres y te diré quién eres.* Tell me who you love and I'll tell you who you are.

I want to tell you one more thing about Cecilia Gentili, because it connects with something that was in the news this week. Her funeral was held at the notoriously conservative St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. The priests there did not realize who she was until the service was already underway. One thousand people had filled the cathedral to honor her in characteristically queer ways and to pray for transgender rights. This was back in February.

The Cathedral later held a mass of reparation to atone for the funeral. They felt it was that sinful.

In this week's news, the Vatican issued a 20-page declaration called "Infinite Dignity." It states, among other things, that being transgender diminishes a person's dignity and is a sin. It asserts that there are only two biological sexes and only two genders. Then, even though it acknowledges that gender is sociocultural, which means humans have made it up, it states that gender cannot be separated from biological sex. They cite the creation story in Genesis as proof.

We honor religious diversity here. I'm standing in front of an interfaith mural. Everything I say in this pulpit is weighed against this backdrop. So I'm going to choose my words carefully.

### **Shame on them.**

I don't say that lightly. I'll tell you why. First, their explanation ignores that there are many things not listed in Genesis that do obviously exist. It names day and night, but not dawn or dusk. It names water and land, but not marshes or wetlands. It names male and female creatures, but not creatures that are both, or that begin as one and turn into the other. Which is a normal thing in nature. Many species have this characteristic.

Genesis speaks of male and female people, which is often taken to mean exclusively one or the other. Yet no one denies the existence of intersex people, not even the Vatican. The Vatican refers to this as a deformity and supports surgeries to make intersex people conform to a binary gender. About 1.7% of humans are intersex. That's about the same number of people who are redheads, but they aren't calling for scalp transplants, so... The Vatican is very committed to binary gender, to the point of erasing any natural variation from that.

The Vatican also describes transgender as a new ideology, much as the far right does here in the US. That is not true either. Gender diversity did not arrive with 21<sup>st</sup> century gender theory. Ancient writings refer to gender diversity. The Hebrew sacred texts refer to six different genders, for example. Those texts also refer to Genesis, because even Genesis isn't as clear as the Vatican says it is, in its original Hebrew text.

The Vatican is doing an intentionally selective reading of scripture. They are ignoring science, history, and reason, and they are continuing to stigmatize and harm transgender and gay people. It isn't only harmful to Catholics. It is harmful to others who hear the message too. And

it is harmful to people who grow up in Catholic contexts that marginalize them, like Cecilia Gentili. That kind of thing is why the far right has seized on transgender people as a target of discrimination. It's why I keep talking about it. It's why Heather Vickery came out last Sunday from Boston, to tell us about what the UU Service Committee, a human rights organization, is doing in response. If you missed her sermon, you can find it on our website. She got a standing ovation at 11am. Her message was an important one.

Discrimination ends lives. Love saves them. I am so glad that Cecilia Gentili was able to become more herself. That she bloomed.

Many of us can relate to a process of becoming more ourselves, or to the yearning to do so. And this, this is holy work.

The belief that transformation, change, is possible is built into our faith. It's part of Unitarian Universalism. Ours is a tradition that welcomes change. Our whole theology and identity have changed since the 1700's. We honor diverse paths to truth and to the holy. Unitarian Universalism honors your unique path, while holding you in our love and offering wisdom from generations and tradition before us. We believe that life is growth and transformation. We believe in your growth and transformation.

May all if it flow from who you are, may it flow from your soul, and bring you more in harmony with love and with the divine.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/01/31/religions-relationship-to-happiness-civic-engagement-and-health-around-the-world/>

<sup>ii</sup> Interview with Krista Tippet. On Being. <https://onbeing.org/programs/james-doty-the-magic-shop-of-the-brain-nov2018/>