

Living Faithfully as a Transforming People in an Age of Transformation: Reflections on the Creation of Living Spirit United Church

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by

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I want you to know how pleased I am to be here – in the midst of Living Spirit United Church as you officially launch your new life together. I am honoured that you would invite me to speak to you. I look forward to spending a good part of this day with you. In part, I am just curious and nosy. In part, I want you to have opportunities to hold me accountable, or to explore something I said that struck you as strange, contentious or just interesting. Also, I want you to know I am committed to your success as a faithful Christian community. Besides, if the truth's to be told, once invited, I could not, not be here. There are at least three reasons:

- First, I was born and raised in Calgary. I have a passion to know about groundbreaking events in Calgary. You qualify.
- Second, I was born into and formed by the United Church of Canada. It is my home. When growing up, I knew both Wesley and Scarboro United Churches. I remember when Riverview was built. In the fall of 1957, when I went off to Queen's, I did so as a candidate for the ministry of the United Church. I studied Theology both at Queen's Theological College and United Theological College, in Bangalore, India. Today, my calling is as a theologically-trained lay person who is exploring the next stage of human development and what it will require of us.
- Finally, over the years I have been a bit player in the life of the Riverside congregation. In particular, I loved and was loved by both Jack and Pat Collett. I will now transfer that soft spot in my heart to Living Spirit United Church.

Now to the work at hand.

I greet you and speak to you in the name of God: Spirit, Son and Father/Mother.

Of course, you know that in our tradition these words do not mean that my words are to be mis-construed as God's Word. But they do express a commitment on my part, and on your part. My commitment has been to be open to the Spirit in my preparation and in my speaking & hearing this morning. Your commitment is to listen with an open heart and mind, being particularly attentive to discern whatever it is that God would draw to your attention. As I used to say to my students, "Don't take notes; note what's taking."

For those of you who care about structure, my remarks are in four parts: after introductory comments I shall make some observations on your commitment to create a new church together, then I shall take you on an all-too-quick recap of human history. I shall close with brief reflections on what all of this might mean for your commitment to become an ever more faithful community of the living Spirit.

Introductory Comments

This is a big day for you. Three congregations – Riverside, Southminster and Westminster – are taking a big step. If Preston Manning were here, he would say you have been THINKING BIG. I agree. You will never again be the same. It takes imagination, courage and foresight to transcend your past and transform your future. You are doing no less. To transcend means to “move beyond that which was; to take on a new identity, and to do so in a way that includes what was in the new identity.” I shall use ‘transform’ to mean essentially the same thing.

So what is going on here today?

A cynic might say that what you are doing this morning is like three tall, but dying, trees in a forest that decide to fall into each other’s arms in the hope that they can all stay standing. You know and I know that this is not what you are about. But if this is not the image, what is?

I invite you to think about X chromosomes – the ones that are carried by both men and women. In the process of a new child being formed, the Y chromosomes are passed down from male to male essentially unchanged. But the X chromosomes are shattered and then come together in a wholly new way in each one of us. The X chromosomes engage in transcendence. Accordingly, they are the source of that which is new and different – of transformation.

Are you the X chromosome of the United Church? Maybe. It sure looks like it to me. Chromosome-like, you are shattering your past identities, in order to be open to the possibility of coming together in wholly new and transformed ways.

Most of us know the experience of breaking old moulds in order that new life might emerge. The desire to throw the energy of our lives up into the air and let it fall in new patterns can be our motivation for changing jobs, changing careers, moving to a new place, or even changing the person to whom we are married. John XXIII said his reason for calling Vatican II was that he wanted, as he put it, “to open the windows, in order to let the Spirit lead the Roman Catholic Church in new directions.” If we are open to the Spirit and willing to allow her to work within us, transformation happens. “Behold, I make all things new!” Sometimes we act consciously. Sometimes we are caught unawares, and just find ourselves shattered... as I did, when at 34 I found myself in the Foothills Hospital having a heart attack.

Either way, new life is not possible without giving up – letting go of – that which we already are. It is no accident that the logic of the well-known hymn is “Break me, melt me, mould me, fill me.” Both the promise of God, and our experience, is that, if shattered, and if we are open to the Spirit working in us, we will also be melted, moulded, and filled. If you want the experience of being filled by the Spirit and made new, then expect to be shattered. If you desire to be made new without your present identity being challenged, then worship some other god. This is part of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer meant when he said God’s grace is a “costly grace.” The steadfast creator God, the God whom we have come to know through the experience of the Hebrew people, including Jesus of Nazareth, is surely in the business of transformation through shattering. One of God’s slogans seems to be, “Those whom I would transform, first I shatter.”

This double-sided dimension of transformation is not news to you. You know, some would say, “all too well”, that your journey – the journey of Westminster, Southminster and Riverside – over the last few years has been a journey of giving up and letting go, in order that new life might emerge. Transformation is a strange gift. But, then, we worship a strange god.

Observations

I want to make a few observations on the journey that has brought you to this place today, with the intentions you now have to create a new life together. As I have been told the story of your journey, and as I have read the research and the reports of your interim Restructuring Board and Task Groups, I have been impressed by what I have seen.

- You come across as intentional – this transformation is no accident that was just waiting to happen.
- You have been thorough in your research; what I called “wide-eyed.” This label may not sound like much, but from me, it is high praise.
- You have offered many opportunities for participation; times when one’s voice could be spoken and heard. If you have been to all of the meetings, you are no doubt close to exhaustion.
- I have been impressed by the pace at which you have moved – there has been no headlong rush into an unexplored future, yet there has been steady movement forward.
- I applaud your commitment to a ministry of small groups. It has been my experience over many decades that when a small number of folks gather often enough and openly enough, true community happens. When folks truly become a group, initial infatuations are overcome, as are initial experiences of being repulsed. In such settings, a quality of learning and growing takes place that is truly transformational. Happily, there is a ton of small group research and theory to back up this assertion and our experiences.

Of course, you will be tempted to call every group a “small group.” There are no points off for being tempted. But this is another temptation to be resisted. We both know that most groups never become “groups” in the sense we are using here – the sense to which you are committed as a congregation. To confuse merely being together with becoming a community is to debase the currency of transformation; to withhold truly transformative experiences from one another. As Jesus said, “Which of you, when asked for bread, would give a stone?”

- Your Vision Statement blows me away. “Lives and communities transformed by the love of Christ working among us.” You are making it hard to sustain the now wide-spread notion that being faithful merely means being caught up in the busy work of the church. Some, no doubt, will still try, but it will be tougher to reduce faithfulness to non-transformative busy work.
- Finally, your name – Living Spirit United Church. Put simply, you have re-named the game. By taking on this name and espousing your Vision, you are moving dangerously towards becoming a faithful community of persons who practise, live and celebrate the presence of God.

Why is this important?

Because you are challenging yourselves, and me, and maybe even the whole of the United Church of Canada, to put a new focus at the heart of your lives as Christians. As I understand your intentions, you are saying that your first work, our first task, is to learn to experience God – to learn to encounter God in our own lives. Our work is the work of “taking on the mind of Christ”; of learning to see with God’s eyes, think with God’s mind, act with God’s will and live with God’s Spirit.

The point is not to substitute God's eyes for ours, God's mind for ours, or God's will for ours, as if she blots us out. I have never been happy with the translation that says, "Not my will, but yours be done," as if the choice is either/or. Rather, as in an authentic relationship of love, those who are in love, over time, become more and more like each other. If we allow ourselves to encounter God often enough and deeply enough, we will be transformed. How and what we see, slowly becomes more like how and what God sees. How and what we think, becomes more like how and what God thinks. What we intend, becomes more like what God wills. This is our claim. This is our experience. The silly question, "What kind of car would Jesus drive?" is replaced by very much harder, but more life-giving questions, "What does Jesus see about us that we are missing?" "What possibilities for our future does he see to which we are blind?"

You are in the process of recapturing what has always been at the heart of the Hebrew-Christian experience. God is in love with us, as she is with all of her creation. God is not just for us, he is with us and wants to live in us the way lovers do. The gospel we offer is about the opportunity to have God dwell within us in ways that transform us. This, as I understand it, has been God's intention from the beginning. This, as I understand it, is what is entailed in "Lives and communities transformed by the love of Christ living among us." All I can say is, "Do it, teach it, share it, live it."

Out of this experience, you will without a doubt feed the hungry and seek justice. But even here, as our consciousness is transformed, we will no doubt do so in ways that we have not yet imagined or seen to be possible. To not feed the poor and claim to know God is blasphemy. This is one truth that the United Church does not need to be taught. However, we do need to learn afresh that to feed the poor and not know God is tragedy. The fullness of human life cannot be achieved merely by seeking what we now call social justice. A truly just society is a fruit of living with the Spirit, not a substitute for it. This, the United Church of Canada is in danger of forgetting. You have not.

Now, I want to shift our gaze from the nature of your work as a people of God in this place and time, in order to think with you about this place and time. In other words, I want to think with you about why your re-focussing of our understanding of the gospel is so important, not just to you and your faithfulness, but to Calgary, Alberta, Canada and maybe even the whole inhabited earth.

My short answer can be set out in two sentences. First, our actual future – the one we are going to get and live within in the 21st Century – is not the one we so widely anticipate and fear. Second, our only hope of facing and fulfilling a transforming future, is as a people who know and are at home with the dynamics of transformation – personal, communal and societal.

A Recap of Human History

A longer answer is by way of a quick tour of the evolution of this planet and human life on it. Allow me to recap the story for you. I shall sketch with the broad strokes of a cartoonist. There will not be much detail, but the character is revealed. What we think we know about the earth and our evolution, now runs something like this:

- About 15 billion years ago, something emerged out of nothing – our universe was born.
- About 4.5 billion years ago, our earth was formed. Its early atmosphere was mostly methane, so it is just as well that we were not here.
- About 2.8 billion years ago, living things first appeared. As life evolved, so did the atmosphere and conditions for life on the planet. The interplay of the living and the planet is real and it still matters.

- About 600 million years ago, for reasons we have yet to figure out, complex life forms emerged.
- About 7 million years ago, humanoid animals emerged in Africa. “Homo” arrived with a consciousness of a person about aged 2 or 3.
- About 150,000 years ago *homo sapiens* emerged in Africa.
- About 60,000 years ago, we were still all in Africa and we were all black.
- About 50,000 years ago, some of our ancestors began to move out of Africa. The first wave was to Australia; the second, to India, China and South Asia; the third to Asia minor and from there to Europe, northern and eastern Asia. About 15,000 years ago a few of the latter crossed the Bering Sea to North America. Over time, those who had moved away from the equator and those who moved far inland, developed lighter skins. This, we now know, is an adaptive response to ensure that we create both folate and vitamin D.
- Up until about 10,000 years ago (8,000 B. C.) the only form of living that humans knew was as small nomadic tribes. Life was precarious and simple (you had to carry everything you had). George Carlin’s wonderful riff on “stuff”, as in “how do we cope with all of our stuff”, would not connect with the experience of nomadic tribes. Because the community was small, life had a face-to-face intimacy. An oral tradition made sense. Those with the deepest knowledge of the tradition held the highest authority. The Earth was a sacred home. One lived with the spirits as one did with any other living form. This was a pre-historic form of living. Adherence to or deviation from god-given norms was what mattered, not the dates at which events occurred.

Remember, the roots of our tradition are in this nomadic tribal experience. Let me read from the 26th Chapter of Deuteronomy, verses 5–9. Notice how huge chunks of history get strung together as if it were a single, simple story line.

“And you shall make response before the Lord your God, ‘A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous...’ ”

You know the rest of the story. My point is, here is the evidence that our faith tradition began with nomadic tribesmen. We are a people whose ancestors knew the struggle of having to learn what is involved in living faithfully as a nomadic tribal people.

- Then, about 8,000 B. C., a second way of living began to emerge, one that truly transformed nomadic ways of living – the life of small settlements based on agriculture. Stuff began to accumulate. A god-given hierarchy was born out of the need to protect the surplus, and the town. It was a time of warlords and small empires. A few developed writing, most did not. For most, life is still pre-historic.

Again, it is useful to recall that our tradition knows the struggle of having to re-learn what it is to be faithful as a small empire. In these terms, the man we remember as King David was a local warlord. Jerusalem was his capital town. This time I read from the 17th Chapter of Deuteronomy, verses 14–15.

“And when you come to the land which the Lord your God gives you, and you possess it and dwell in it, and then say, ‘I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are round about me’; you may indeed set a king over you, him whom the Lord your God will choose. One from among

your brethren you shall set a king over you; you may not put a foreigner over you, who is not your brother.”

Notice the assumption, one made by every tribal people, that they are both different and special; that others are inferior.

- Then, about 3,500 B. C., a third way of living emerged, one that was different enough from what had gone before that it transcended the earlier ways – humans learned to live as part of large Empires. I think of China, Ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome and, on our side of the Atlantic, the Mayans and Incas. Now there is truly enough stuff that serious and rigid hierarchies were the norm. Meaning and power still came from the gods, as embodied in the head person, be he King or Pharaoh. Large empires required a written language. While life had many dimensions, all were still within a single and coherent cosmos. Life still had most of the wholeness it always had for tribal peoples.

By the time we get to large empires, we are in the time of Jesus and the formation of the Church. It is not an accident that its taken-for-granted organizational pattern was borrowed from empire – a pre-democratic hierarchy. As the present Pope is fond of saying, “The Church is not a democracy.” Again, we see the struggle to re-learn what it is to be faithful – to sing the Lord’s song to a new tune.

- Then, about 1,000 years ago, a fourth way of living began to emerge in what we now call North Western Europe – the foundations for what we call Industrial consciousness and culture were being laid. At its heart, Industrial consciousness breaks with all that had gone before, in that its deepest instinct is to treat life as parts, not as a whole. It is as if humans discovered that the single picture at which they were looking was in reality a giant jigsaw puzzle that could now be broken down into its constituent parts. Empirical analysis, the heart of modern science, was born. By 1500, some biblical scholars no longer asked, “What does the text mean?” The central question in every tradition-bound culture. Rather, they asked, “What does the text say in its original Greek and Hebrew?” Only after this is known, will we even think about meaning. You know the story – the Reformation gave life to modern science and both attacked the established structures and patterns of the authority of Empire.

For example, the locus of life and faith is no longer the community. Persons are no longer primarily defined and understood by prescribed social roles and widely accepted *a priori* knowledge of what is true, good and faithful. For the first time in history, for good and ill, persons are seen to be individuated individuals. The struggle to re-learn the faith in these terms was costly, hugely difficult and greatly resisted. The Counter Reformation was a serious effort by the authority structures of Empire to reassert its full authority and reclaim its rightful place in our lives. Modern countries were born at Westphalia in 1648 in order that Catholics and Protestants could live side by side – granted, in different countries – and not have to continue to kill each other in the name of God. Mercantilism and the Industrial age followed, including the emergence of what you and I call Canada. Over time a fourth cultural paradigm emerged in the West. The Industrial view, with its focus on individuation in every sphere of life became dominant, not in numbers, but in power and influence.

You and I are the direct inheritors of this fourth stage of human evolution. Protestant Christianity can be seen as the form that faithfulness takes during the emergence of Industrial consciousness.

It is important that we understand just how different we are from all pre-Reformation forms of living. Today, for most of the six billion on the planet, and for perfectly understandable reasons, Protestant Christianity and the Industrial culture that goes with it are just plain heresy. In their terms, we are God-denying and soul-destroying. Interestingly, these are the very charges that Osama bin Laden

makes against the Industrial West. And from his point of view he is quite right. The issue is not Islam versus the Industrial West. The issue is all forms of 7th Century living, versus late Industrial forms of living. Most 7th Century Christian Bishops would be as appalled and alarmed as is bin Laden by the thought that we represented the future of the faith. This insight sure makes both bin Laden and George W. easier to understand. It is a pity that neither of them exhibit any sense that they are bit players in an long and increasingly complex drama of human history that neither one grasps nor understands.

So, where are we?

I note that the taken-for-granted view of every human culture is to assume that it is god-given and, therefore, right. Further, it is assumed that it will go on forever. We can see this assumption at work among aboriginal peoples. It is also alive and well in us. Our default view is that our version of society – the late modern Industrial stage of history – will run on forever. Scholars such as Francis Fukuyama, C-grade graduates from Yale, such as George W. and little guys from Shawinigan, such as Jean Chretien, all agree that Industrialism is the frame of reference of the future. Note that every political party, be it the Alliance or the NDP, have a single and identical meta-message – “Elect us and we will make the Industrial Age work for you.” Left and Right are a fight about how to best organize life *within an Industrial way of framing life*. Neither the Left, nor the Right challenge the adequacy of the Industrial frame itself. As yet, no political party says, “Elect us because we are now in the fifth long, but profound, societal transformation of human evolution. This is a transformation we can neither start nor stop. However, we know how to align with that which is emerging better than anyone else. We are the most reliable guides in a time of transformation. You will be safer on your journey with us than with anyone else.”

While such political parties do not yet exist, in the 21st Century, we will need such guides. As with Israel leaving Egypt, we are in the process of leaving the known way of living behind and heading towards a more promising future. As with Israel, we face a future that largely lies beyond our present imaginations. I am suggesting that the 21st Century will be much like the 15th Century in Europe. Then, virtually everyone agreed on the shape of the future. Then, virtually everyone was simply and importantly wrong. We can now see that by 1450, too much had already happened to hold the known European world together much longer. But they could not see it because the common frames of reference by which they defined their world inhibited the accurate perception of the developments and the forces that were transforming their history. So it is with us. We are already into the transformation of our culture, but we do not know it... yet!

Those of you who know me will know that I have invested my life as an early explorer of the reality, dynamics, drivers and depths of long-term cultural change and transformation. I have concluded, first, that whole cultures can undergo profound transformations. Second, the Hebrews are right: God is the God of history, she is at work in such cultural transitions. Third, we are now living in the early days of a centuries-long period during which Industrial cultures are being transcended. My research and observation is that, for good and ill, we are already well on our way to developing a way of living that is truly post-Tribal, post-Empire and post-Industrial. Put bluntly, George W and the protesters of the G8 are both wrong – the Industrial future they expect, and welcome or fear, will not be our future. Enough has now happened to put the skids to it.

Reflections

Let us reflect on what we have seen. I offer three things to ponder, Mary-like, in your hearts and minds long after this day is done.

1. The transformations of life occur at two levels. One is a transformation within human hearts and local communities *as they are defined by the meta-frame of their time*. The second is a transformation of the meta-frame itself. This latter is less common, but no less real. Four such transformations have in fact occurred within human experience. The fifth is just getting nicely under way.
2. God loves and redeems human beings at every stage of our development. In a world within which, for the first time in history, people from each of the four ways of living are now living cheek by jowl, best we burn this thought on our brain. Whatever differences there are among cultures, they are not measurements of the love or mercy of God toward them. Even the differences among you who have come from three different congregations might well be cast in this light. There are good reasons to differ and discuss. There are never good reasons to pull cosmic moral rank on one another. We also know a secret that our official world does not know – Christ is active within and among us, hard at the work of transforming us. None shall emerge unchanged.
3. Clearly your vision applies to the first type of transformations – those that take place within human hearts and communities. Because all known cultures live unconsciously within their meta-frames of reference, it would be perfectly normal for you to assume that this is all that your Vision means. But once you have glimpsed the reality of the transformation of whole cultures, the question does seem to follow, “Must our vision extend to the second type of transformation – a transformation of the Industrial meta-patterns by which we interpret all of our experience, even our experience of God? Is God still at work transforming whole cultures, even ours?”

It will not surprise you that my own response to these two questions is “yes.” I offer this to you as a thought to feed on, and be fed by.

You will be thankful that I will not go on. It is enough, (more than enough, many of you may sigh) that I have tried to do three things.

First, I have acknowledged, held up and given thanks for the life-giving work you have done in “making straight the way of the Lord” by reminding us of the centrality of the deep game God plays with us – transforming us as persons and communities by Christ’s love.

Second, I have reminded us that the God we worship is the creator of all that is. She is the God of history and she is still at work among us, our communities and our cultures.

Third, I have planted the seed that our only hope of seeing, thinking and living into a transformed future, is as a people who know and are at home with the dynamics of transformation – personal, communal and societal. In the coming years, it will be increasingly apparent that we need the leadership and guidance of such people right here in Calgary, Alberta. May Living Spirit United Church be a faithful and pioneering incubator of people who are steeped in the work, rhythms and dynamics of transformation.

Let us pray.

Lord God, Holy One of Israel, you have known us, loved us, carried us and healed us all our lives. Send your Holy Spirit to work within us – in each one of our bodies, hearts and minds. Work among us to transform us, our communities and even our cultures. We are unworthy, hesitant and unfit for this work, but we are also open to your Spirit and eager to make a difference. Hold us and heal us, we humbly beseech you. Just don’t give up on us. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Your reflections and comments are welcomed.

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