

Those of you who read the newsletter know that this past Friday I participated in Trans Awareness Week. With Rabbi Sara Abrams and Sam Allen, I helped facilitate a workshop on the use of ritual to celebrate transitions. Our audience was small, but the discussion was rich. We had two third-year graduate students in Marriage and Family Counseling, both doing counseling work with the Stonewall Alliance, a 3rd year undergraduate, and two family members. One family member had a grandson while the other had a preteen son who have identified as trans.

Sam Allen, who identifies as gender queer, shared their story about a ritual of name change. And no, I didn't use an incorrect pronoun. Some of you may be familiar with the use of gender binary pronouns among some of the queer community. It is a practice that I have little practice with; I have to consciously think about my word choice every time, and I have more than once referred to Sam as her or she. Sam gently corrects me. For my daughter, this use of pronouns seems to roll right off her tongue. She easily transitions between her, him, they as plural and they as gender queer. Just another example of how the youth are leading us.

While all personal transformation requires a willingness to die to our present self, in many, if not most, cases this death is less impactful, more private, than the decision of a trans individual to act on their knowledge of who they are. For Sam, this culminated in their name change. Music and friends and the actual burning of a copy of their old birth certificate marked this transition to who Sam now recognized themselves to be. With the burning of the birth certificate, the former Sam, known by a different name, was both figuratively and, in some ways literally, dead.

Prior to a change, things may have gone along, relatively unchanged, for a long time. Although, like the very hungry caterpillar, we may be starting to feel a bit, or a lot, uncomfortable. Change is brewing, but it is not yet clear how, or if, it will manifest. Unlike a caterpillar, as humans, we are not destined to make personal, transformative changes. Sure, there are some that are forced on us. We go off to school as a child. Many of us graduate from high school and enter the first stage of adulthood, be it college or other training or working. Our children leave home. We retire.

We retire. Let's stop here, because it is illustrative of how we may choose or refuse to transform ourselves. We have all heard the stories of the retiree, usually male, who drops dead of a heart attack soon after retiring. What's going on here? A transition is being forced, and the newly retired person has not done their preparation, the internal work required to make a new life post-retirement. This work typically starts long before retirement, with an assessment of what brings meaning to one's life and how one is going to find that meaning when one is not called to work every day. Transition is hard work. It takes energy. The bigger the transition, the more energy. The enormous caterpillar builds a cocoon and emerges, radically changed, no hint of its former self, as a much more delicate (and lighter) adult.

As do individuals, so, too, do organizations undergo transformative change. It is no less easy for an organization than it is an individual. It may even be more difficult. There are many, many books written about family dynamics, organizational dynamics, systems dynamics. About how an organization prefers stasis, resists change.

This congregation is in a process of change now. As a result of decisions we made some years ago, we now have a beautiful sanctuary, on which we make mortgage payments. And we have a very nearly full-time minister. We did both of these things knowing that they were a big stretch for us. We hoped, anticipated, that we would grow into our new financial commitments. We were not yet really, really big, like the hungry caterpillar. We were growing, but were still relatively small. Smaller than many churches who take on a new building or nearly full-time minister, let alone both. We hoped that our commitment to both of these changes would facilitate growth. And it has. Our consultant reports that average attendance on Sunday mornings has doubled, yes, doubled, in the last 2-1/2 years.

But we are not yet large enough to sustain what we have taken on. We are still in the cocoon, transforming. That transformation is uncomfortable and requires financial commitment beyond pledging. The members here will be meeting immediately after this service to make some decisions about our transformation.

There is a rule of thumb about starting a new business. The rule is this: you need to have the financial resources to get through at least five years. It takes that long to build a successful, sustainable, business.

We are not a business. But when we took on a mortgage and a minister, we committed to a new program model, in some ways like a new business model. Instead of continuing as a family sized church (up to 50 members), we committed to growing into a pastoral sized church (up to 150 members).

Family sized and pastoral sized churches are different in more than just numbers. They are different in the ways in which they function. Methods of being and operating that worked at the smaller size must be revised or replaced, at least in part, by new ways of being and operating. Church systems experts, those who have studied how churches operate, across all denominations and faiths, tell us that the transition from family to pastoral is one of the most difficult. It is difficult to let go of that family way of doing things. This is what we have taken on.

We are less than three years into our commitment, our process of change. We are still in that cocoon, transforming. It is hard work. It is uncomfortable. The fruits of our labors are not yet fully apparent. With your help, we will emerge from that cocoon by better living our mission, our mission of serving our internal community and the community of Chico through living our UU values. The votes of our members today will determine if we will be granted the time and resources to live into our vision; our vision of a church with a vibrant and growing Religious Exploration program, filled with young families; our vision of a dynamic church that changes and saves lives within our walls; our vision of a church that shows up, that influences the social justice conversation in Chico.

Whether our transformation be personal or organizational, it is tough work. May we be blessed with the commitment and courage and patience to see us through our transitions.