

From Transitioning to Transforming©

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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Before I begin talking about the subject of my sermon, namely transitioning and transforming, I want to acknowledge a simple but important fact. The fact is that some of you who are here today may have little or even no context for what I will be sharing this morning. Those of you who are visiting, as well as those who have only been attending for a year or less, don't have personal experiences of the transitions this Fellowship has gone through over the past 3+ years. So before I jump into the topic of my sermon this morning, I would ask for your assistance as I do a quick poll. This poll will help all of us get an idea about what experience or knowledge each of us has related to the recent history of this congregation. So look around as I begin the poll.

How many of you started coming here since August 1 of last year? How many of you have began attending during my time as minister here but before we moved back into this building? How many of you began attending during the time Rev. Nina Grey was the minister? How many of you were already attending prior to Rev. Grey's arrival? And one last question. How many of you began attending prior to the Fellowship hiring its first minister, Rev. Lois Van Leer? Thank you for participating in my poll. And thank you for letting all of us get a sense of the different perspectives and histories we each hold based on the length of time we have been involved with UUFB.

So now I want to jump into the transitioning aspect of my sermon title. Those of you who have been here four or more years are quite familiar with the transition points I am about to share. Please be patient and stick with me as I help those who have been here a shorter time learn about the changes and challenges you have navigated.

In 2015 this Fellowship began one of the most significant transitions in its 60 year history. You are currently sitting in what instigated that transition. Prior to the acquisition of this building the congregation was without a home of its own. I have heard more than one congregant state that prior to 2015, UUFB was known as the church in a Subaru. Don't get me wrong. The congregation didn't meet in a Subaru. Every week though, things that were needed for the service had to be transported, by car, to and from the rented space where the congregation was meeting.

Obtaining and then getting into this building wasn't a simple process. There were multiple steps involved and some of the steps posed significant challenges. Let me give you some examples. First, the congregation had to decide whether or not to accept the gift of this building. You heard me correctly, this building was a gift to the congregation. The gift was contingent on the congregation raising enough money to remodel the original structure to make it adequate for our needs. The congregation accepted the gift and held its first ever capital campaign. A capital campaign is no small task. But that wasn't all. After the congregation moved into the original structure, it had to move out again so the building could be remodeled. Back we went to storing our stuff in someone's vehicle while we rented space on Sunday mornings. We finally got moved back into our new home last August, several months later than originally planned.

And in the midst of all of the building stuff, the congregation experienced yet another significant transition. Not all that many months after getting the building, the congregation's minister, Rev. Nina Grey, retired. So as the congregation was dealing

with the many issues related to this building, it was also in the search process for a new minister. Selecting a new minister is an involved and complicated process in UU churches. The search takes a year or more, and ends with an interview with, and congregational vote on, the proposed ministerial candidate. The interview by the way lasts for eight days — enough time for any and all members and friends of the congregation who want to meet and ask questions of the candidate to do so. I want to thank the members of this congregation who initially selected me as that candidate, as well as all of you who voted to call me as your minister.

What I just shared is a very short synopsis of the transitions this Fellowship has gone through in the past 3+ years. This congregation has navigated these changes, these transitions, remarkably well. And these transitions are, to a large extent, complete — we are now fully in our new home and I, as the new minister, am immersed in the life of the congregation.

Hopefully this gives everyone a foundation for understanding what the transitioning portion of this sermon is referring to. I want to shift now to the transforming portion of my message today. For those of you who were here for all of the transitions I just went over, now is the time to return from your mental meanderings. Some of what I am about to share regarding the transformation that is taking place may provide you with new insights into what has been occurring within the Fellowship.

Before I go into details about the transformation, I want us to think about what the difference is between a transition and a transformation. To give you a sense of what I am getting at here, I would offer a couple of examples where both transitions and transformations occur. The first example I would have us consider is the process a caterpillar goes through to become a butterfly. The transition points are clear. The caterpillar encases itself in a cocoon and emerges as a butterfly. The transformation is slow, mostly hidden from sight, and quite amazing. The second example is a process all of us have been through. The transformation from being a child to becoming an adult. There are multiple transition points as we grow and mature. Like the previous example, the transformation is slow, aspects of it are often unseen, and it is incredibly amazing.

This Fellowship has been involved in the process of transforming for about the past 10 years. It has been occurring slowly. Much of it has been out of our conscious awareness even if it wasn't out of our visual sight. And the transformation, at least in my assessment, is quite amazing. The transformation I am referring to involves the Fellowship's development from what is sometimes referred to as a "family-size" congregation to a "pastoral-size" congregation.

On a typical Sunday, a "family-size" congregation usually has 60 or fewer adults in attendance. A "pastoral-size" congregation on the other hand averages between 70 to 150 adults at weekly services. All of you who have been around for 10 years or more know that we have been growing. Our average weekly attendance on Sunday mornings has been in the "pastoral-sized" range since early in this century. Our average attendance may drop a bit this year because we added 10 extra services from June through August. Even if our average attendance drops a bit we will still be in the "pastoral size" range.

Another indicator of our transformation from a "family-size" to a "pastoral-size" congregation can be seen in our membership numbers. Here are a few numbers that might be of interest to you. In 2008 we reported to our parent organization, the UUA,

that our membership was 84. Currently our membership stands at 138. That is more than a 60% increase over the past 10 years. This Fellowship's growth in membership has exceeded the growth rate of Bozeman through the same 10 years. During approximately the same period, our pledge income increased by an only slightly smaller amount, 55%.

But the transformation is more than mere numbers or dollars. The transformation is also about how we function as a Fellowship. A "family-size" congregation depends on people knowing one another. Things get done because Jack knows Jill, and Jill either has the keys or knows who to contact to get them from. As UUFB has grown, it has been challenging if not impossible for most of us to connect and build relationship with every new person who comes in our doors. And for those of you who are new, you have an even greater challenge. If we were functioning as a family-size congregation, you would need to meet and get acquainted with all of the 130+ members in order to figure out how things work around here. That seems like **way** too much to ask of the new people in our midst.

In a "pastoral-size" congregation things work in a subtle but significantly different way. Things work not so much because people know everyone else. Instead, things work because there is a structure or a process that is commonly accessible to all. An example of such a structure can be found in the monthly UUFB newsletter. Next time you are reading your newsletter cover to cover, start on the last page. There you will find a list of all the Fellowship's committees, working groups and task-forces and who the contact person is for those that have one. You don't have to know everyone to find out who to contact when you have a question about Religious Exploration programs or Social Justice & Action activities. You can look at the list and quickly figure out who to speak with when you have ideas about how the Sunday service should be changed. I won't promise the changes you suggest will be made but your ideas will definitely be seriously consider. Another avenue to share or to get information is the questions, appreciations, concerns and comments box. Some of us refer to it by its acronym QACC. It is located in the Community Hall, near my office door.

The transition this Fellowship is making has been going on a long time, and it will continue for several more years. Recall here what I stated earlier, transformation is a slow process. And aspects of a transformation are also often out of our visual sight and/or our conscious awareness. Hopefully what I have been sharing will open our communal eyes and increase our awareness and understanding of the transformation we are in the midst of.

In the months or even years ahead there will be a significant amount of work that we will need to do to successfully and fully make the transformation to a "pastoral size" congregation. One of our tasks will be to create the structure which will allow us to continue to function well as more new people find us and become part of our religious community. As Bozeman continues to grow, I am certain there will be people who will resonate with our values and our aspirations for making this community and beyond a better place for all.

And a second task, that is equally as important, will be to create new ways for people to connect and get to know one another. Ways that will allow people who are drawn to our message and our purpose to find their place here with us.

Accomplishing the work this transformation requires will take more than just a few of us. It will take all of us. From what I have experienced so far in my 2+ years as your minister, I am confident that this Fellowship has emerged from its chrysalis. As I stated earlier, in my assessment, the transformation this Fellowship is in the midst of is truly amazing. And so are all of you who are making this transformation possible. You are doing the work of unfurling, drying and spreading the wings of this now pastoral size congregation. You are doing this through building the structures that will support this congregation in the years ahead. You are getting us ready to take flight. Soon we will catch the wind and become airborne, even as we continue to gather in this, our new home, every Sunday of the year.

So may it be.