

Waterbugs and Dragonflies: on Being and Becoming

Sermon given to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greensboro, North Carolina on 5.13.18 by
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I have imagined this sermon for a year and a half, wondering what to say to you, the congregation that has made me the Unitarian Universalist I am today. For those of you who I haven't met, I was a long time active member here until I felt the call to ministry and began attending seminary at Union Theological Seminary in New York City in August 2016. I have been watching this congregation from afar through your email newsletters and facebook postings. I have been keeping track of your growth and remembering you fondly. This congregation will forever be my home congregation. I have been ruminating over the many changes UUCG has been through in the over twelve years I've been connected with this congregation, either close or from afar. When I became a member here in 2006, UUCG had a settled minister. Over time that settled minister left and UUCG went through seven years of transitional ministry, from Interim, to Developmental, to Interim again, to a new settled minister beginning in August. What a time it has been for this congregation, its members, friends, and the community it impacts! When my wife Michelle and I left Greensboro, Rev. Diane was just beginning her ministry here and I had every faith that in two years UUCG would be calling its next settled minister. I am beyond thrilled that UUCG has not only put in the years of work in preparation for this to happen but has followed through with the detail work – and the pledges to bring this to fruition. From the distance of watching all of this come together, I couldn't help but think about all the ways that this congregation has grown and changed over the years. It has had to work on examining who it is separate from its last settled minister, it's worked on its mission statement and it's become engaged in anti racism work. It's helped me see ever more clearly how much everything really is connected.

Knowing all of these things, and knowing that many of you will have questions about me and Michelle's life and adventures in New York City, I've been struggling with what to say to you, this changed congregation, knowing that you and I now see each other differently. The things we've been through and experienced we can't truly articulate to other people or even each other. For example, when you go to seminary, people tell you it's "hard" but you can't possibly know what "hard" means until you're in the middle of it, wondering if you have what it takes to stick with it. Similarly, when UUCG embarked upon its process of transitional ministry, there were times when the way was frustrating and confusing, but there was only one thing to do: keep going even when the way was unclear. Someone outside of this congregation could tell you about things that would come up along the way but they can only tell you about their experience. There is a way people can explain things to us in their words that we can't possibly understand until we are experiencing it ourselves. That's the only time we can say, "Aha! So this is what they were referring to." In that moment of realization is the choice to stay in the hard times and I applaud UUCG for sticking with it even when the way was hard.

As the time to give this sermon got closer, I was attending a worship service at my field ed congregation, the UU Fellowship of Mount Kisco, New York where Rev. Michael Tino, the former ministerial intern here, is the minister. The Director of Religious Exploration gave this reading, one in which I see parallels to UUCG's experience of these last seven years. This is called *Waterbugs and Dragonflies* and it is written by Doris Stickney..

Down below the surface of a quiet pond lived a little colony of water bugs. They were a happy colony, living far away from the sun. For many months they were very busy, scurrying over the soft mud on the bottom of the pond. They noticed that every once in a while one of their colony seemed to lose interest in going about its business with its friends. Clinging to the stem of a pond lily, it gradually climbed out of sight and was

never seen again.

“Look!” said one of the water bugs to another. “One of our colony is climbing up the lily stalk. Where do you suppose she is going?” Up, up, up it went slowly. Even as they watched, the water bug disappeared from sight. Its friends waited and waited but it didn’t return. “That’s funny!” said one water bug to another. “Wasn’t she happy here?” asked a second water bug. “Where do you suppose she went?” wondered a third. No one had an answer. They were greatly puzzled.

Finally one of the water bugs, a leader in the colony, gathered them all together. “I have an idea”, he said. “The next one of us who climbs up the lily stalk must promise to come back and tell us where he or she went and why.” “We promise,” they said solemnly.

This part of the reading made me think of the part of UUCG’s story where we wondered how each part was going to come together. We could see what was happening with other congregations going through similar experiences but we couldn’t quite get to where they were. We watched them from afar, we attended healthy congregation workshops, we went to leadership trainings but we couldn’t quite visualize how the pieces were going to come together. It’s a hard thing, comparing our insides to other’s outsides. When you’re in an anxious system, it’s easy to fall into the trap of wondering what’s going on with other congregations who have gone through similar changes. You wonder, “how did they move from here to there? How exactly are they making the pieces come together?” But you can’t know from the outside looking in, can you? You can only know your own experience, as messy as it is. You can ask for wisdom from others but no one can go through this experience for you, only you can do that for yourself.

Going back to the reading: One spring day, not long after, the very water bug who had

suggested the plan found himself climbing up the lily stalk. Up, up, up he went. Before he knew what was happening, he had broken through the surface of the water, and fallen onto the broad, green lily pad above. He was so tired, and the sun felt so warm, that he decided to take a nap. As he slept, his body changed and when he awoke, he had turned into a beautiful blue-tailed dragonfly with broad wings and a slender body designed for flying.

He couldn't believe the startling change he saw in his body. His movement revealed four silver wings and a long tail. Even as he struggled, he felt an impulse to move his wings. The warmth of the sun soon dried the moisture from the new body. He moved his wings again and suddenly found himself up above the water. He had become a dragonfly.

Swooping and dipping in great curves, he flew through the air. He felt exhilarated in his new environment.

This section of the reading highlights the exhilarating joy that comes to us after the transformation. Here was this dragonfly who, appropriately, decided to take a nap after leaving the lily pond. Like all creatures, resting is part of the process of growth and renewal. In my own way I did a similar thing as a first year seminarian. I didn't find a congregation that felt like home for me and there were many Sundays that I stayed home. I gave myself permission to take a break from attending services, to recoup, and to adjust to my new academic life. I know here at UUCG the first year or so after the most recent settled minister left, this congregation went through its own process of looking inward and "taking a nap." It needed to take the time to be very intentional about how it was going to move forward. When it became clear that more time was needed, UUCG decided to give itself the time it needed to become stronger in itself before launching the settled minister search. That turned out to be a healing opportunity for this congregation before it moved onto its dragonfly stage.

I wasn't here for the vote a couple of weeks ago, but I imagine the feeling here was similar to the dragonfly's amazement at its own wings, being astonished at its own transformation. From the pictures I saw online, what I saw was joy and happiness, but also tremendous relief. What I experienced from those of you I follow on social media was elation over the process finally coming together and coming to an end. I saw that you were thrilled that the right minister was called to this congregation. All of the pieces have come together, like the dragonfly with the outstretched wings. There was the rest, the struggle, the growth, and the awareness of creating a new thing entirely.

And to complete the story: By and by, the new dragonfly lighted happily on a lily pad to rest. Then it was that he chanced to look below to the bottom of the pond. Why, he was right above his old friends, the water bugs! There they were, scurrying about, just as he had been doing some time before. Then the dragonfly remembered the promise: "The next one of us who climbs up the lily stalk will come back and tell where he or she went and why."

Without thinking, the dragonfly darted down. Suddenly he hit the surface of the water and bounced away. Now that he was a dragonfly, he could no longer go into the water. "I can't return!" he said in dismay. "At least I tried, but I can't keep my promise. Even if I could go back, not one of the water bugs would know me in my new body. I guess I'll just have to wait until they become dragonflies too. Then they'll understand what happened to me, where I went, and this wonderful new life I've been given." And the dragonfly winged off happily into its wonderful new world of sun and air.

Friends, when I heard this last part I got choked up right there in that service. As someone who

has been contemplating this sermon of what I would say when I returned to you, my religious community, after being away at seminary, I realized this was the perfect metaphor. I can never return to you as I was before. Although for the most part, except for the hair, which is shorter with a little more silver, I look the same; on the inside I have gone through a lot of changes that I won't fully understand for many years to come. I can come back and visit but I can never re-enter the pond because as happy as you are to see me, I will always be "outside" the group moving forward.

In the same way, if you peer closely at yourselves, UUCG has gone through a similar metamorphoses in the last seven years and can never return to who you were when your transition began. This congregation literally re-created its organizational structure, created new ways of being with each other, re-examined the story it tells about itself, and kept moving into the unknown and taking risks. This was hard, challenging work and you never gave up even under really difficult circumstances. Your current self can never go back to your old self. You have changed too much, made too many strides into your true self to go back in time. While the wounds of the past never completely go away, the healing and transformation that has happened here is incredibly remarkable.

While you're in the middle of a change it's hard to understand what's going on and it's very hard to articulate it to others. I personally felt a lot of guilt because I didn't keep in touch with friends here in Greensboro as well as I wish I would have because I was so overwhelmed with trying to figure out how in the world to explain seminary and the experience of living in New York City to people who haven't experienced either. Instead, I stopped communicating with friends here in Greensboro. It is only now, two years in, that I can begin to gather my thoughts about it and even then I know what I can share with you is inadequate for the task. Some things just cannot be explained or shared with others. Truly for many types of changes you can only see the change in

yourself or others by looking back in time. Hindsight is a wonderful thing. One thing it shows me is that I need to be ever more patient with myself and to let go of the guilt I've been carrying about not keeping folks up to date. I couldn't have if I wanted to. There just weren't the words.

Here at UUCG you could tell people outside of this congregation about the changes in the bylaws, moving to a policy governance model, how transitional ministry has worked here, and on and on, but no one outside this system can truly understand. You have to live in the inability to explain these changes to others while at the same time knowing for yourself that you really did make the right choices. One of life's lessons is knowing that just because you can't explain your choices doesn't mean they were wrong. This is one area we can let go of our perfectionism and move towards more grace and patience with ourselves and each other.

So a few years from now, after Sadie has been here a little while, there may come a time when some of you will have pangs of wishing for the "old days." You may be the dragonfly looking back into the pond of the past and wanting to reconnect with your old self. You may have difficulty adjusting to the new changes brought about by Sadie, yourself, or a combination of the two and you may experience nostalgia for "the way we've always done things." When that happens I challenge you to stay in the not knowing, just like you've done for these last seven years. Stay in the discomfort. Be willing to take the rest you need when you need to rest, enjoy your new wings, and explore new ways of being. You are now the beautiful dragonfly. I wish you joy on your new flight. Blessed be.