



The Internship: **Inevitable Transformation**

From the message series *SpiritFlix*

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The basic ingredients for bread are fairly simple and abundant. You need flour, yeast, salt, and water. When mixed in certain proportions, these four ingredients are all one needs for bread. Well, not quite. There are particular ways to mix those ingredients, kneading them to form strands of protein, the gluten, that forms the structure of the bread. But even then, we don't quite have bread as much as we have a good bread dough.

To transform these ingredients, to change them from their basic form into bread, we need heat — whether it be the flame of a wood-fired oven, or the flame of a gas fired oven, or even the resistance heat from an electric. To change flour, yeast, salt, and water into bread, we need the radiant energy of heat.

I have been asked in the past, why Unitarian Universalists light a chalice. What does it represent? What does it symbolize? And sure, we can talk about the symbolism of our religious heritage, and sure we talk about the symbolism of the light within ourselves, but what is that light for?

I think that this light, this flame, like the flame of an oven, represents the crucible of change, the possibility of transformation that exists when we are in beloved community.

You see, I think this chalice is a symbol of this congregation.

All of this stems from a conversation I had a few weeks ago with our friend BE Young. She asked me if I felt I had been transformed by my experience, my internship, here at WellSprings.

I admit that the question caught me off guard. Among the many things I have been working on and through, as this internship comes to an end, I had not been considering whether or not I had been changed, transformed, by the experience.

I suppose it is because so much of transformation takes place over time such that we don't always notice the totality of the incremental changes until we look back and remember where we started. That's how real growth really works, slowly, incrementally, so that the only way we know something has transformed in us is that we remember what it was like before we changed.

For example, I remember back when my daughter Sydney was a toddler. I was working at the dining room table and she was toddling around. Now up until that day, she was short enough to toddle right under the table — not even needing to duck. But on that day, she had crossed the threshold in growing just exactly to the point where she was no longer able to go under the table without ducking. It was with one of those gut-wrenching cracks to the head that we were both reminded that she was growing from a baby to a young child. Picking her up and wiping away her tears, I congratulated her on how much she'd grown. And while I'm certain she *"felt"* transformed, in the moment, I don't think she really appreciated it. But lesson learned — sometimes transformation isn't easy or fun.

The SpiritFlix movie I chose for this week is *The Internship*. It was kind of low-hanging fruit, I suppose. It tells the story of two middle-aged salesmen who have lost their jobs, and find themselves in a very different job market than they have ever known, one in which technical savvy and youth are the core

strengths. They have neither. Nonetheless, they manage to talk themselves into a coveted internship with the internet search company, Google. Of course, by the end of the film, they have transformed themselves as well as many of the people around them. The process of change for them was not easy, and their sometimes bumbling efforts made for the humor in the film.

I say “of course” (they were transformed) because this is a Hollywood movie, and generally speaking I expect that some sort of change will occur for the characters in a movie. Otherwise it probably isn’t much of a story.

But I also say “of course” because I believe that when we engage in our communities, when we open our hearts — at least enough to know and be known by others — that transformation is inevitable. The only way to stop the change is to close ourselves off, to isolate ourselves and our hearts from those around us.

“Of course” is also how I answered our friend BE. (At least I think that’s what I said.) Of course, I have been transformed by our work together. But the question made me wonder, first, *how* I have been transformed? And secondly, in what way? What has actually changed in me.

The first question turns out to be the easiest to answer. The how I have been formed from a middle-aged seminarian to a minister has to do with both the ingredients and the heat and light of this congregation.

Like our bread, the ingredients are simple enough.

One such ingredient is one that is perhaps easy to overlook. Kind of like the salt in the bread. You don’t really know its in there until it is not. Bread without salt tastes “flat.” Here at WellSprings, I think hospitality is that ingredient that is so much a part of the life in this congregation that it is easy to forget that it comes from a specific intention.

A few minutes ago, you all got up and greeted each other. Now, I’ve been to lots of churches that do this. Mostly folks would politely stand up and shake hands to the cardinal directions — one to the left, one to the right, one in front, and one behind. Then sit down.

But not here. I wish you all would have a chance to experience that moment from up here. It is extraordinary - people are up, moving around, smiling, talking, finding new folks to greet.... The energy that comes forth is breathtaking. And, I must say that it is really difficult to get you all back in your seats and settled down.

But beyond that warmth of welcome, there is the hospitality that many of us don’t notice. The hospitality of the tech team. The hospitality that comes from the folks who help set up and take down this space every week. I had a colleague refer to this as “the ministry of moving chairs.” And it is a ministry. And like the salt in bread, it is most noticeable only when it is absent.

Another ingredient that gets mixed in here is the sense of open-heartedness. People do not arrive at WellSprings fully formed with all their spiritual or religious questions already answered. We all arrive here seeking a place in which we can openly ask our doubting questions, where we can test and try our answers, and learn from each other’s stories.

I’ll give you an example. Several weeks ago, John Jacobs stood here and offered what we call his “Charged Full Living.” For those of us that were here, it was a powerful moment. For me, the words John spoke taught me something that I had never realized. John stood here and taught me about salvation.

You see, I had been wrestling with the idea of “salvation” for quite a while. Salvation is one of those terms that in my Christian upbringing, I have to admit I never understood. You’d think that somewhere along the lines in seminary, I might have come to an understanding of what salvation was. What does it mean to be saved? How does one get saved? By what? For what? I never got it.

But John, standing here sharing his story, finally taught me about salvation. About being saved every day by countless people, sometimes dramatically, but mostly in simple, quiet ways. All the thousands of things that people do to keep me (and all of us) alive. Keep me breathing. Keep me able to tell my wife and daughters that I love them. Day after day, in ways large and small, I am saved. Most of the time I didn't even realize it — until John talked about what saved him after his car wreck. Until he opened his heart and began to point out all the people, both ones he knew, and more he didn't, that saved him. I kind of took it for granted that I would be alive and breathing when I wake up each morning. I do not anymore, and for that I am blessed.

There are lots of definitions of the term “blessing”: One is “a beneficial thing for which one is grateful; something that brings well-being.”

Gratitude is another ingredient that I have an even deeper appreciation for, having experienced it here at WellSprings. There is rarely a day that goes by that I don't feel gratitude for something. However, there are many, many, days that go by that I do not express it, that I do not name what it is that I am grateful for. Especially here, I think I have failed to say “thank you” enough. So, if you would indulge me for a few moments, I want to express my thanks, both specifically and generally.

I am grateful, of course, for Rev. Ken, for his openness and willingness to take on an intern, his patience with me, his confidence in me. I am also grateful for the leadership of this congregation. It would have been about three years ago when Ken brought my name to the Board. I don't know exactly who was on the board at that time, but I know Carl Bader was one of them. I am grateful for the risk you took, the trust you placed in Rev. Ken, and the trust you placed in me, sight unseen.

I am also ever grateful for the staff — Becky and Carol and Maria — who have always been willing to answer my questions, and who have loved and supported me through the last couple of years. Their wisdom, and their commitment to this congregation, have taught me as much about the kind of minister I hope to be as any seminary course could ever do.

I also want to express my thanks to the band. Believe it or not, there are many Sundays when I arrive here tired and cranky and pretty much depleted. Then the music starts, and note by note, word by word, my spirit rises and I am charged up. It is a gift, and one I am ever grateful for.

There is a team of people here at WellSprings that perhaps many of you didn't even know existed. They are my “Intern Team.” These five people have met with me, observed me, challenged me, critiqued me, welcomed me, and encouraged me. And the important thing that you need to know about them is that they weren't doing all of that *just for me*. They were doing all of that because they believe deeply in what WellSprings is in their lives, and in the lives of the congregation. They also believe that one way WellSprings can grow into the world — to reach more people — is to help teach new ministers about how this community “does” religion. They have been incredible guides for the last couple of years, and I want to name them and acknowledge them: John Jacobs, Carole Hovis, Tonie Scullion, Michael Evans, and Lisa Gallagher.

So I could go on, enumerating all the ingredients. But, like the bread, just mixing stuff together doesn't get us to our goal. In fact, like bread, just mixing stuff together can just as easily end us up in a gooey mess.

So I want to go back to the light of this chalice. To the light and heat that it represents. It is that light that is within each and every one of you that makes transformation possible. Your willingness to take all the ingredients and let your collective light transform them into something new — something that is no longer the separate ingredients we mixed together, but something transformed.

And I think this is why we come to gather in a congregation. We somehow know in our hearts that something in our lives needs to change. We may not be able to point to what exactly, but there is *something*. We intuitively know that life is change, all living things change, and that as living creatures we are vulnerable to change. And here, we have found a place where we can bring that vulnerability with the expectation that we will be changed.

Have I been transformed by serving this congregation? Of course. I came here as someone who was thinking he wanted to be a minister. I leave here today knowing that I am one. A transformation that I believe was only possible because of each of you; who have held me and supported me and changed me through your generosity of spirit. Yes, I came here to serve this congregation and to learn what is meant to be a minister so my transformation was intentional, if not inevitable.

So now, if being in an internship here is inevitably transforming, what does that mean for you?

I would like to invite each of you to spend the next year in your own internship here at WellSprings. Engage deeply and fully in whatever aspect of WellSprings that you find the most compelling. Open up your heart even further, and look for ways to challenge yourself here. Step into some part of this community that seems a bit scary, or a bit impossible. Or perhaps you find one of those “ingredients” — hospitality or gratitude or openness or whatever ingredient you find resonating with your heart — find that ingredient and cultivate it, bring your light and heat to it.

So.

As you may have discerned by the length and ramble of this message, I have a tough time saying goodbye. Even when I know I will see you again. Even as I will carry you all in my heart. Please know that wherever my ministry may take me, WellSprings will forever be a part of who I am.

So, as I have received so many blessings from you, I offer my own in return: May you be at peace. May you know love. And may you pour your peace and your love into the world. Amen.