

Metamorphosis  
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I was off island this past week and, as always, was overwhelmed by signs and stores and litter and cars. This expresses itself in me with impatience to keep moving, to not be held up by red lights and traffic, to get the heck out of and around as fast as possible. At one such moment, on the way to the cobbler to fix up the shoes for Alisha at the orphanage in India, I was literally brought up short in one such long line of cars and signs and coke cans thrown onto the tiny green spaces. Something in me was tired of eying the surest escape route that would surely save me 3 minutes.

Instead, I became still and looked around. To my right was a mother in a car to the backseat in conversation with her child. To my left was a woman perfectly coiffed in a Mercedes Benz, screaming into the phone. The 18 wheeler just behind me, belching exhaust, was driven by a middle aged man in a tshirt with muscled arms and an ashen face. I imagined he was ready for his living room with his favorite chair that always eased his back. Another car sported a Make America Great again sticker. The one beside it had a Make America Green again sticker.

As the left turn light went green before mine, I watched car after car pass. Faces behind the glass and I considered, we are all seek love, to feel our lives matter, to have enough so that those we love can feel safe enough, so that we can feel safe enough.

And all those ages and types of machines, and aging and types of human beings, from the black smoke belching souped up truck and the tanned arm propped on the window frame to the hybrid that sat quietly, engine off until hitting the gas again with a carefully dressed computer programmer tapping his fingers on the steering wheel, I felt this kinship with humanity, our foibles and lack, our profound beauty and tragic misdirection.

I wondered that if each of us there were granted a metamorphosis, what it would be? What are we seeking to become, what transformations await us, welcome or unwelcomed?

Franz Kafka's book, *Metamorphosis*<sup>1</sup>, came to mind for me while writing this sermon and insisted it had something to add that was important. You be the judge. In this book, one day, Gregor Samsa, a traveling salesman who lives with his mom, dad and sister and is the breadwinner for the family, reflects on how dreary life is. As he looks at the wall clock, he notices that he has overslept and missed his train for work. He ponders the consequences of this delay.

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<sup>1</sup> Franz Kafka, *Metamorphosis* (Prestwick House, Delaware, 1912, 20015).

Gregor becomes annoyed at how his boss never accepts excuses or explanations from any of his employees no matter how hard-working they are. Gregor's mother knocks on the door as she is concerned for Gregor because he is late for work, which is unorthodox for him. Gregor answers his mother and realizes that his voice has changed, but his answer is short, so his mother does not notice. His sister, Grete, to whom he is very close, then whispers through the door and begs him to open it. He tries to get out of bed but is incapable of moving his body. While trying to move, he finds that his office manager, the chief clerk, has shown up to check on him. He finally rocks his body to the floor and calls out that he will open the door shortly.

When Gregor manages to unlock and open the door with his mouth, he apologizes to the office manager for the delay. Horrified by Gregor's appearance, his mother faints, and the manager bolts out of the apartment. Gregor tries to catch up with him, but his father drives him back into the bedroom with a cane and a rolled newspaper. Gregor slowly comes to terms with having woke up that day as a giant insect.

After his secret of being an insect is discovered, Gregor's family realizes that he was no longer of any use to them. They slowly came to feel he added only burden and not value. They imprisoned in his room. Slowly, his possessions were removed, and for some time no one bothered to clean his room. "Streaks of dirt stretched along the walls, here and there lay balls of dust and filth."<sup>2</sup>

His sister, whom Gregor trusted most, even tried to convince his parents that Gregor was no longer with them. "My dear parents, she said, things can't go on like this. I won't utter my brother's name in the presence of this creature and so all I say is: we must try to get rid of it."<sup>3</sup>

And so it is that Gregor dies. It is unsure of natural or unnatural means, and the family goes on to another life, a simpler life, a more genuine life, maybe one that their own dependence on him as provider prevented.

This brief reflection on this complicated work, led me to consider how often we become someone else so that we might feel and be enough, and what the cost of it on us and on others too. Though most of us do not change into bugs to avoid being what time and culture has made us, what does being trapped in roles that do not have room for us to thrive, cost us, and cost those around us in terms of being able to experience our full selves and so their own?

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<sup>2</sup> Kafka, 114-115.

<sup>3</sup> Kafka, 124.

Brene Brown, author and lecturer writes, “The difficult thing is that vulnerability is the first thing I look for in you and the last thing I’m willing to show you. In you, it’s courage and daring. In me, it’s weakness.

“This is where shame comes into play. Vulnerability is about showing up and being seen. It’s tough to do that when we’re terrified about what people might see or think. When we’re fueled by the fear of what other people think or that gremlin that’s constantly whispering “You’re not good enough” in our ear, it’s tough to show up. We end up hustling for our worthiness rather than standing in it.

“When we’ve attached our self-worth to what we produce or earn, being real gets dicey. The good news is that I think people are tired of the hustle – they’re tired of doing it and tired of watching it. We’re hungry for people who have the courage to say, “I need help” or “I own that mistake.”<sup>4</sup>

Hustling for love. We all hustle for love, but when can this hustle become damaging? When can holding up only one piece of who we are keep us and others in boxes that damage us all? When we dare only be one part of who we are, it is so easy to not allow those around us their beauty, difference and complexity.

The UUA Director of outreach, Marchaé Grair, writes a blog that I follow. In her last one called Present Day Prophets, she writes about listening to a podcast called "[Harry Potter and the Sacred Text](#)," in which co-host Casper ter Kuile shared a powerful language reframe.

Casper ter Kuile refers to people who experience oppression as "prophetic" instead of "marginalized." He said he uses this reframe because people on the edges of society have a fuller picture of both hardship and possibility than those whose experiences that are more mainstream, that are designated as ‘normal.’

Grair asks, “What if allies thought of justice work as a prophetic encounter where they are called to learn from those pushed to the edges of society? What if people believed they had to earn the title of ally by learning from the prophetic?”<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, some critics writing about Kafka’s Metamorphosis, liken Gregor to Jesus because his life was a message that others could not hear, because he was a prophet, because his presence radically transformed and was radically transforming.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danschawbel/2013/04/21/brene-brown-how-vulnerability-can-make-our-lives-better/#729c9be036c7>

<sup>5</sup> <http://uua874.activehosted.com/index.php?action=social&chash=ff49cc40a8890e6a60f40ff3026d2730.2695&s=854ff7279910f110525602dc16ef1b35>

What does the prophetic, within and around us have to teach? Can we still hear the voice of that which lurks behind all the rushing and passing and craving and anger and fear and need without awareness, calling us into this possibility of now, of courage and hope.

I learned something about courage and hope when studying caterpillars. We all assume that the greatest moment in the life of a caterpillar is when it becomes something else. Turns out, there are many extraordinary moments for these multi-legged beings before the butterfly incubating cocoon is ever spun. The gum leaf skeletonizer molts its external skeleton and then picks it up and wears it as a helmet.

It does this again and again until ten helmets balance on its tiny head. The Lycaenid caterpillar secretes a sugary syrup that attracts hungry neighboring ants that hang out with the caterpillar for a while, warding off others who would cause it harm with their companionship.

Also, turns out that butterflies remember their caterpillar life. Even though the caterpillar is broken down entirely and its components reorganized into a butterfly or moth, the winged creature remembers the lessons learned as a multi-legged squishy earth crawler. The butterfly lives with the caterpillar, and the caterpillar within the butterfly.<sup>6</sup>

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Prophets are not just things of the past — they still live among us, taking risk by chance or by choice. And in order to live prophetic lives, we must listen, be present, allow ourselves to change as a response, allow ourselves to become who we are not yet and who we have always been.

Waiting in that long line of traffic the other day, one of the cars just behind me, without hubcaps, old and worn, was driven by a teenager, who kept flicking cigarette ashes out the window which vented her smoke filled car. Her eyes seemed glazed over as if she had no idea if turning left or right or going ahead would bring her what she sought.

I wanted to get out of the car and tap on her window and gently say, “It doesn’t half matter which direction you go. The meaning you seek comes from understanding that you are part of something that matters, in which your voice is needed, a place that is creating and asking for your gifts every moment. Sit still and you will come to learn that you are and have enough, as a bug or butterfly, or on your way to one or the other, you are exactly where you are supposed to be, learning what is yours to learn as part of this web, this interconnection, this cocoon of humanity.

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<sup>6</sup> Brandon Keim [Brandon Keim](https://www.wired.com/2008/03/butterflies-rem/?mbid=email_onsiteshare) 03.05.08 [https://www.wired.com/2008/03/butterflies-rem/?mbid=email\\_onsiteshare](https://www.wired.com/2008/03/butterflies-rem/?mbid=email_onsiteshare)

Metamorphosis, holy possibility, gives us all the chance to see and understand and participate in new and unexpected ways, to know prophets and fly over tree tops, or to meet the wisdom makers of our times while sitting in a traffic that will not release us.

Let's make one another the sugary drinks that come from being who and where we are and invite to share with us those we do not know and cannot yet see. Let's hustle for presence, for interconnection, for this generative moment together that will never come again. Inviting others to share this *who we are now* allows others to share who they are now. This is a communion that has the power to save.

So, come one and all the to this bug and butterfly party and turn off your engines, shed the skin you no longer need, don a costume that shows you as who you are now, turn up the music of now and dance this dance of redemption.

Amen.