



Auckland Unitarian Church  
*Love beyond belief*

## A Chrysalis Opens

Clay Nelson © 21st June 2020

Christopher and Catherine are two of my Facebook and real friends. A number of years back I presided at their wedding. During our preparation time for the big day a bond formed that has continued to this day.

During the lockdown I came to look forward to their funny and entertaining posts about their bubble life. Then the posts became intriguing as they shared stories about Gavin, their pet caterpillar that lived on an indoor swan plant.

It was a big day when Gavin also went into lockdown, creating his chrysalis. Gavin didn't do much just hanging there. It was hard to tell if he had a good book or Netflix to keep him from coming down with cabin fever. As we were coming out of lockdown, it turns out so was Gavin. Sure enough, Gavin hatched as a Monarch butterfly. Catherine offered him his freedom out of doors, but Gavin was not interested, He is now an indoor butterfly who sits on her knee while she reads or watches TV...much to the consternation of Lulu the cat.



Gavin the very hungry caterpillar's transformation into a butterfly is a classic motif of a resurrection tale. It certainly resonates with our national experience of hoarding before going into lockdown, living in a bubble, and finally hatching into a level 1 new world. For some, he also reflects a reluctance to go outside.

That is a very understandable reluctance in a world where the pandemic is still getting worse in many countries and we are discovering that our borders are not impervious. Yet on this our first Sunday when we can gather together physically with few restrictions I am concerned that we don't lose the opportunity to venture out to test new ways of being a faith community. It is, in fact, long overdue that we do so. The present model may suit those of us who are older, the Silent Generation and Boomers, but it clearly is not meeting the spiritual needs of Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z. This is reflected in decreasing identification with any religious group in the general population. Our Unitarian numbers are no exception, but we are not as locked into one way of being "church". For instance, we have learned during lockdown that meaningful worship can be held virtually. It extended our reach not only throughout New Zealand, but to a small extent globally. So, that is why beginning today we are having two services: one in the building and one on Zoom.

That is a good baby step, but only a beginning. The mission of Unitarian Universalists is not to gather on Sundays to light a chalice, hear a talk and share a cuppa. While this is a critical element of building a community, it is not enough to justify the resources necessary to maintain the building or pay a staff unless it inspires us to fulfil our mission to a broken world in great pain that begins with owning our own brokenness and pain.

An example might make this clearer. (<https://tinyurl.com/ybmrbtbh>)

In 2017, after months of toxic infighting, the congregation of Koreatown's First Unitarian Universalist Church, one of the most radical and historic churches in Los Angeles, was faced with the most difficult question in its 143-year existence: Could it survive? The question was not born of philosophy or mysticism or meditation. It was far more human than that.

It was about money and property. A stagnant congregation with a shrivelled endowment faced a daunting expense: the minister's salary. Back from a sabbatical, the minister had a proposal: Sell the church. He estimated the value of the land at roughly \$7 million and figured that First Unitarian could build a smaller home with half that money while living off the rest. But the congregation was bitterly divided over the plan.

Over the next few months, as the argument turned increasingly ugly, the minister scolded his flock in a newsletter for not rushing to his side, asking. "Do we want to be a church, or not?"

He had been hired to revive the church but now was saying growth was impossible where they were. Many supported his plan. Who argues with a minister? But at a congregation-wide meeting to decide the church's fate, an enthusiastic band of

local immigrants showed up to argue in favour of the status quo. After a close vote the church stayed and the minister hit the road, along with half of the congregation.

The board was reduced to just one committed member: Ligia Gonzalez, a prickly septuagenarian communist originally from Nicaragua who lives off Social Security and sleeps in a nearby rent-controlled one-bedroom courtyard apartment surrounded by portraits of Che Guevara and Nicolás Maduro. This revolution was more than her moment — it was her specialty.

What's happened since could be called a minor miracle. After withering to just 20 people after the schism, the congregation boomed to more than 60 regulars. It continues to expand every month. The church's ledgers moved into the black for the first time in recent memory, and it plays an outsize role in progressive politics and culture.

The congregation — peppered with self-described “red diapers” (elderly folks raised in communist homes in the 1940s and 1950s) — suddenly won over enough young people to sustain new programmes with new energy (and funding).

When asked how she chooses her battles, she laughs. “There is only one side worth defending in history,” Gonzalez says. “I stand on the side of the people. What other choice is there?”

A firebrand like Gonzalez would stick out like a sore thumb in a typical church — but First Unitarian is far from typical. Since being founded in 1877 by an abolitionist turned suffragette it has immersed itself in all the progressive issues of the day. Its board even refused to sign a loyalty oath of allegiance to the United States, losing its non-profit status and paying taxes while challenging the law in the Supreme Court and winning.

Since the coronavirus descended on the city, the church has strived not to lose its social mission while maintaining the necessary distance. The congregants now conduct services via Zoom. The church has increased its food services to meet growing need in the neighbourhood. It was handing out 400 grocery bags a week until the lockdown — it now distributes 1,600. “It's not charity,” says Gonzalez. “When we do it, it's solidarity!”

“She's mean as hell in the best possible way,” says Sara, a congregant. “She fancies herself a fancy lady. She's all for community and social justice without the phoniness and the evangelism.”

“There was a little Christmas party, and Ligia told me we needed to turn it into a Latin dance party. With wine. At noon!” says Sara laughing. “I just look at her and the other elders and realise the palpable possibility of my own future. I’m not fated to be stodgy or grouchy or conservative. There’s a thing people say: If you’re not a Democrat when you’re young, you have no heart. And if you’re not a Republican when you’re old, you have no brain. Ligia tears that thinking apart by having a soul. I want to be her — be that — when I grow up.”

I’m pretty sure Gavin the caterpillar wouldn’t be comfortable taking such risks to become a new faith community in a new age. But we have a choice: we could be like Ligia. Are we ready to hatch and boldly go where no butterfly has gone before?