

CHANGE CRAFTING:
A PRAXIS OF DEEP CHANGE WORK

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ABSTRACT

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We live in a time of unprecedented risk to human life on earth as a result of human-made climate change, and we face enormous and growing social, political, and international challenges and threats. At the same time, we are struggling to cope with a technological landscape that is radically outpacing our biological and social capacity to evolve with it. These multiple realities converge to create a crisis: we both need skilled and resourceful change leadership, and many of the techniques we have been using to convince others to change their behavior or join in the effort of creating change are at best ineffective, and at worst, work against our success. In addition, most approaches to change work focus narrowly in scope: for example, on community organizing or running a successful social media campaign.

This project is designed in two parts. The primary material is presented in a self-guided educational website: www.changecrafting.org, which articulates a whole-life process of working for change. It includes technical information and skill building, focusing on the power and impact of storytelling; guided personal reflection on core values and mission-crafting and why they are essential, and places these in the context of radical self-care, which includes rest, joy, spiritual practice, and the necessity of community. The secondary material is this paper, which provides insight into the process

which led to the project and the ChangeCrafting website, the theological and practical understandings which guide it, and reflection on how this work may be used in the future.

The work of making a difference in the world is incredibly difficult. The problems we face as a human community are immense; they can be utterly overwhelming. In many cases, response requires intensive effort, and many of the problems we face will take not years but generations to resolve. From the brutality of racism to grotesque and pervasive income inequality, from global pandemics to the existential threats of climate change, the challenges we face are daunting. This means we need people who can face these challenges with courageous hearts and the ability to persist for a long time, in the face of setbacks, personal fears, or even significant losses. This is no small task. To do this, individuals and communities need to understand how to *thrive in the midst of difficulties*; they need to be able to build practices that allow them to persist and remain whole regardless of the challenges they face. They need emotional, spiritual, and communal well-being. Out of the desire to respond to this need, I have created a process called *ChangeCrafting*, with an accompanying website that serves as a resource center for those who hunger for a new way to build a better world.

For over 20 years, I have served as a minister and activist, working side by side with others in multiple communities, fighting good fights, winning some and others, remaining in the fray over long years. I have prayed with and pastored to people who face this world with troubled hearts. I have preached to choirs and had my heart broken by the many times I failed to move people into braver spaces of justice-making. I have been transformed by moments of breakthrough and *allelujah!*, when by grace a life was touched or a person made ready for new work in this world.

As the challenges we face seem to level up, so, too, did my sense of urgency that we need new tools and ways of working together to face them. Combining what has been successful in my years of ministry and activism with research and study in the Public Theology program at Drew, the *ChangeCrafting* process is designed to offer a roadmap for resilience and refulgence, as well as deeper understanding of *how* to create change in the world. This paper is also a roadmap; it is an articulation of the journey that led to the creation of *ChangeCrafting*, and it lays out the way in which this work is intended to effect change by guiding people through a whole-life process of technical skill-building, personal reflection on core values and meaning, community development and practices of well-being. Along the way, it will pay homage to a specific few of the many teachers, theologians, thinkers and activists whose work I have found to be inspirational. Lastly, it will attempt to paint – at least in broad strokes – a vision for “whither from here?”

For as long as I can remember, I have been a religious person. I say *religious* rather than *spiritual* very intentionally, because from my earliest days I have believed that our search for meaning and wisdom is essentially a communal practice. Indeed, my theology resists the notion that there is any meaningful concept of the “separate self;” we are One in both essence and effect. This is a quantum reality and an experiential truth: we cannot act without having some impact on the whole of existence, and we have no being outside of that energetic unity which I call God. Therefore, I sensed from my earliest childhood that to pursue spiritual questions requires, at least in significant aspect, participation in a community of seekers and reflection on the truths that others have found on their journeys.

Although raised by Boomers who neither practiced any form of religion nor provided any religious education, I began seeking out religious community by the time I was six years old. By the time I was seven, I walked alone to the nearest church; in my South Carolina home city, that was, unsurprisingly, a (Southern) Baptist church. Between elementary and the end of middle school, I also passionately pursued a solitary Judaism and then a communal Catholicism. From my dedicated albeit home-grown Jewish practices, I developed a deep appreciation of how a religious tradition could connect one to a cultural lineage and integral practice of faith; I had a *mezuzah* and tried to keep Sabbath practices in a non-religious, definitely non-Jewish household. From my Catholic experience – I attended mass with the large family of a good friend who was Catholic – I began to appreciate the power of ritual, and what arises when one sets a space for the holy in small ways, as when a saint’s protection or care may be sought for specific concerns. After these deeply felt but poorly understood theological forays, as a teen I whiplashed into an angry atheism. I was furious with the capricious and mean-spirited, judgmental white Father-God of my limited imagination, and rejected him with extreme prejudice. And yet my yearning for a God I could love was always simmering below the surface. In college, I pursued the Philosophy of Religion (indeed, became a philosophy major during this time), and frantically sought a God I could believe in. With the birth of my daughter and the insight of feminist theology, I was able to begin taking the “leap of faith” so frequently – and frustratingly – referenced. I became a Wiccan priestess, and was drawn to the practices of the pagan community in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s.

Before too long, however, even this more satisfying religious community and its practices felt limiting. I was also beginning to hear, although I did not understand it at the

time, a long-submerged call to religious leadership. I was a priestess, but I felt Wicca's limitations. I was beginning to understand both the limitations and the more eternal truths that could be discerned within all the great religious traditions. I wanted a place where I could "have it all," religiously speaking: openness to all theological wisdoms, community, and ways to live one's values in service. I found it all in Unitarian Universalism when I was 22 years old. Not just that, but I found a religious tradition where women were – and had been, for generations – fully ordained and recognized religious leaders. By the time I was 26, I had discerned that call to ministry, and was enrolled in seminary, my five year old daughter a beloved companion on a joyful journey.

I have been an ordained and called Unitarian Universalist minister for almost half my life. I began my work as an activist and change agent as a teenager and as a minister, it has been central to my ministry. Rape crisis work and women's rights, criminal justice reform, LGBTQ rights and marriage equality, climate justice and anti-racism work, conflict resolution between individuals and in communities, immigration reform and witness at the border, resisting war and resisting the obscenities of wealth disparity and unfettered corporate capitalism; all of this and more has been at the center of my ministry work, because as a theologian I believe with Dorothee Sölle that "God has no other hands but ours." Changing the world is our responsibility, our blessing and our heavy burden. It is both the journey and the destination.

What this has taught me is that **changing the world is extremely hard**, and you cannot do it alone. Shocking insight! It is also exhausting, demoralizing, infuriating, and sometimes seems completely impossible. Even attempting it can put your physical and mental health, your safety, and even your life at risk. It can rob you of your job, take you

away from family and friends, and set you apart from others. It can lead to sleepless nights and despair, and too often does. All of this is an inherent risk of change work, but it is not a *necessary* risk. By which I mean, all life carries risk. Change work is always difficult and it always carries some kind of risk. And yet, **how we go about it** makes all the difference. *ChangeCrafting* is in no small measure a response to this hard-won knowledge.

And yet, it is also the fruit of another specific spiritual and theological journey. By the end of my third congregational ministry, after 15 years as a pastor, I was spiritually exhausted. I had been preaching, marching, organizing, and providing pastoral care without pause for years, as well as dealing with the innumerable tedious administrative and organizational headaches never mentioned in seminary. I had only modest personal community beyond my husband and children. I had few spiritual practices and no spiritual community of my own where I was not The Minister. I was drinking too much, turning to television and more empty pursuits for “relief,” and could barely maintain the intellectual interests required to provide meaningful worship and to keep pace with the causes to which I was committed. I was running behind my life, and spending quite a lot of time trying to escape the reality of it. “God” had left the temple of my spirit, or more accurately, I had slowly wandered far into the desert of my soul, and I was crawling across the sand, parched and feeling alone.

This is the point at which experience underscores the degree to which we can never know how far-reaching might be the impact of our ministry, nor how grace may yet bring us home. While I was desiccating in my Midwestern ministry setting, one of the few genuinely meaning-filled and transformational experiences I had was a conference

held each year in New York City: the Revolutionary Love conference. I first attended in 2015 and was transported. It was my first direct experience of the Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis' ministry, and of the Middle Project. It was also my first experience of Middle Collegiate Church as a justice-seeking, mission-focused ministry community. It provided confirmation that what I felt in my gut ministry *should* be was possible. It restored to me spiritual hunger and gave me just enough spiritual sustenance to start moving again. Within 18 months of that Revolutionary Love conference, I was living in New York City, the first woman called to share the pulpit one of the largest and most historic Unitarian Universalist congregations in the world, the Unitarian Church of All Souls NYC. I was now part of a ministry team and no longer flying solo. Best of all, the congregation had a working relationship with Middle Collegiate, and the Rev. Dr. Lewis. Location alone cannot change our circumstances, although I would argue that it can make a great deal of difference. Even at All Souls, I had poor spiritual and emotional hygiene. Donald Trump had become President of the United States. Everything I had worked for and deeply cared about was under severe threat. I was diagnosed with breast cancer in my first year at All Souls; therefore even as I tried to adjust to my extremely new ministry community, I had to deal with chemotherapy, more than one major surgery, and a difficult course of radiation. I had few community justice partnerships in New York City and felt both overwhelmed and unclear how to forge them in the biggest city in the country. It was a difficult beginning.

In my second year, the church was entering a multi-million-dollar capital restoration process of the historic sanctuary and buildings. Construction, especially in New York City, is an intensive process, and it affects everyone and everything in its

wake, so year two was even more chaotic, combining Trump, construction, cancer and a lack of mission clarity. And yet something I had been waiting for happened that year. While on Facebook one day, I happened across an ad for a new Doctor of Ministry degree at Drew Theological School: a degree in Public Theology, led by no other than Jacqui Lewis, John Janka, and their spiritual co-conspirator, Terry Todd.

It felt resonant with my original call to ministry. Out of noise and confusion, a clear, high note, unmistakable. I applied, was accepted, and a new journey began. As much as it was an excellent program with people whose work deeply inspired me, it was also a way I gave myself permission to refocus on my spiritual development and to once again take some time to contemplate larger questions of meaning and purpose. It was an opportunity to meet and be inspired by others on the journey with me; not-alone. It was an opportunity to be a student again, and to prioritize discovery and introspection. Most of all, it was an invitation to ask what I was doing with my ministry, and to take seriously the call to the public square, where progressive theological voices are needed to help awaken and activate the moral consciousness of the people of the United States (and around the world, in some cases).

Divine timing, indeed, as soon the world spun into a global pandemic, shattering “business as usual.” Scientists could measure the consequential stillness on the surface of the Earth. And thanks to the Public Theology cohort, I was part of a community which struggled openly and mightily with the multitude of cascading impacts brought on by our new reality. We learned how to learn on the fly. We discovered and taught each other that imperfect did not mean wrong, and good enough was sometimes more than enough. We had the experience of practicing being deeply human, in public, and in community.

More than two years of transformational study, research, reflection, and community practice built on the foundation of a lifetime of personal religious exploration and over 20 years of practical ministry and engaged activism has resulted in the work you see in my Public Theology project, the *ChangeCrafting* process and its resulting educational website. But its genesis also has one more spiritual parent, and that is climate change.

For my entire life, I have learned about and experienced the damaging effects of human-made climate change. I was around for the first Earth Day, and as a parent, have had the same stomach-curdling sense of horror as the world changes around us. We have seen the very cycles of the seasons disrupted, and I often consider the future that my children will face. As a minister and an activist, I have participated in marches and rallies intended to “raise awareness” or advocate for some particular piece of change. I’ve preached on the dangers of climate change. I’ve seen all the heart-breaking or terrifying “factual” information out there. I have also seen, in my own work and the work of others, how **ineffective** it all is. Particularly ineffective are the exhortations intended to appeal to the goodwill of individuals to recycle, turn off lights, use less are the exhortations intended to appeal to the goodwill of individuals to recycle, turn off lights, use less water, eat less beef, or carpool. None of these are bad things, but neither will they create the systems-level change that is necessary; there are *much* more significant changes needed (and possible!) at the level of cities, corporations, and governments. Bombarding individuals with information that frightens them and fills them with despair does not effect change. Indeed, it often works against it, as frightened and overwhelmed people are more likely to resist exposure to new or additional information about the subject and are

less creative and capable of taking action. Fear and worry activates avoidance and denial, even in the most responsible and well-intentioned.

It also overlooks the truth that there are amazing ideas and solutions available everywhere! The human species is fabulously creative, and where there is a problem, there are people working on solutions. The difficulty is that we rarely hear about solutions, and we absolutely don't have a communal narrative arc to direct all our considerable energy, common wealth, and cooperative efforts behind the most promising of these, or the ones best suited for our neighborhood, city or state. Most of all, we don't talk about the problems and the path to solutions as a "Hero's Journey," framing each of us as an integral part of a powerful story of facing down incredible odds and formidable dangers...and winning. Research shows clearly that we are story-telling animals, and all effective change is predicated on the story we tell ourselves and each other.

My understanding of the need for world-changing better stories, and my efforts to discover how to craft such is in no small measure the inspiration for this work. It emerges from my desire to not only discover how better to personally be effective as an agent of change and to raise my voice in the public square(s), but also *to equip others* to be effective in that space. It also arises from my theological conviction that it is through deep inner reflection and meaningful, joyful and resilient practices of community that we experience God and transform our world in the direction of that greater spirit of Love which transcends all particulars. As my Unitarian Universalist colleague the Rev. Theresa Ines Soto often says, "All of us need all of us to survive."

In the following pages, I will systematically walk the reader through the elements of the *ChangeCrafting* process which can be found in most detail on the companion

ChangeCrafting website. My intention is to explain the process, as well as include insight into why each component is a part of the overall *ChangeCrafting* concept. I will also indicate where, over time, the work is likely to be expanded or offered in different forms or formats.

As noted, *ChangeCrafting* is a whole-life process of engaging change. It is designed to systematically help people approach change work in a way that provides guidance in developing skills and expanding a knowledge base which serves change-creation goals, but also offers evidence that effectively working for change additionally requires *embodied resilience*, a *commitment to community and connections with others*, and *deep knowledge of oneself and one's values*. The accompanying website, *ChangeCrafting.org*, is where this information is provided in fulsome and creative detail, including educational videos, workbooks, and illustrated text. In this paper, the *ChangeCrafting* foundational principles can be expressed more concisely in these ways:

- The world is best served by people who are able to bring their whole self, loved and loving, to the altar of Life.
- Human beings thrive when they know and live their values; understand their purpose (mission) in life; are embedded in caring and responsive community; and know how to cultivate rest, joy and happiness even in difficult times.
- Lasting and meaningful change cannot be created through evoking fear, anxiety, or rage. To cooperate enough to find good solutions and to persuade others to join in the effort of creating change, one must be able to cast a vision of a different future in which others can see themselves, or the better world they would like to inhabit or leave to their children.

- Casting a vision requires one to be able to **tell a better story**. We are storytelling animals, and everything about our lives is created by the stories we tell ourselves and others.

There is both art and science to telling stories that change people’s minds. It is helpful to know some of the basic science and how to develop the art to **tell a better story**; the kind of story that can change the world.

Based on these principles, I have designed *ChangeCrafting* with five “crafting” elements: **NeuroCrafting, StoryCrafting, VisionCrafting, LifeCrafting, and TheOdyssey**. The term “crafting” brings to mind turning one’s hand and heart to particular effort, and this is the intention of *ChangeCrafting* work. Each crafting element has its own set of principles and can be developed and understood apart from the entire process, but are intended as a nested component of the whole.

NeuroCrafting is the most technical section and is focused on helpful information regarding basic neurobiology and cognitive frames. The goals of **NeuroCrafting** are:

- *Embed an understanding of neuroplasticity*. It is helpful for change crafters to understand that our brains are capable of change and growth at any age, and can frequently adapt even after significant trauma. Understanding our own neuroplasticity can help us be more effective at developing new skills and unlearning biases. It can inform our behavior so that we increase the likelihood that we will remain cognitively healthy across our lifespan. It can also help us devise ways to engage the neuroplasticity of other people. This makes us more

effective change agents when we can incorporate working knowledge of neuroplasticity in our work with others.

- *Understand the power of cognitive frames.* Our brains are constantly receiving an overwhelming amount of incoming information, much of it simply beyond our capacity for awareness. As biological supercomputers, our brain is designed to create shortcuts and shorthand so that we can function effectively in our lives. One of these many forms of shorthand is cognitive framing, by which an associated set of qualities, characteristics or even physical elements is activated to make sense (tell a story) about our experience. Understanding what cognitive frames are and how much they determine people's thoughts and actions is a critical element for change crafting. To be able to intentionally choose which frames to activate or to avoid can significantly boost the effectiveness of change work.
- *The biochemistry and impact of negative emotions.* Many people, when they are concerned about an important issue and want to encourage others to take action, tell a story of *how awful the problem is*. From the effort to evoke sympathy, concern, outrage or fear, they hope to convince others to take action. *ChangeCrafting* offers an explanation of what happens biochemically when we are flooded with hormones associated with fear, anxiety and distress, and why these may lead to some forms of immediate response or limited action but actually work against sustained and positive change over the long term. It also

explores Joanna Macy's concept of *apatheia*¹, the deadening of the heart, and the specific ways in which we will avoid engaging in change work in our attempt to avoid these feelings.

- *Learn how to inspire by evoking positive hormones.* Feelings of excitement, love, happiness, empathy and sense of bonding can be evoked by the biochemical impact of the right storytelling techniques. These are the emotions and connections that inspire others and help them feel connected to us and to the story we are telling. As human beings, we like to consider ourselves highly rational, influenced most significantly by facts or careful reflection. It is more usual for us to make decisions based on non-rational processes such as bias, in-group influence, habit and other shortcut processes. Awareness of these mental processes can help us as individuals seeking change, and as change crafters working with others to create change.
- *Use the F.A.C. E. Reflection.* **NeuroCrafting** includes a specific reflection process I have developed called the “F.A.C.E. Reflection”: Focus, Acknowledge, Craft, and Engage. The F.A.C.E. Reflection walks change crafters through a process in which they **focus** their goal; **acknowledge** and support the leadership, ideas and perspectives of those most affected by the change issue; **craft** solutions; and **engage** others in the work.

¹ Joanna Macy and Molly Brown, *Coming Back to Life: the Updated Guide to the Work That Reconnects*, (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2014), pps. 22 – 30.

Understanding the science, cognitive processes, and reflective process of **NeuroCrafting** provides resources for change crafters to look more closely at the core practice of *telling a better story*, or **StoryCrafting**.

“If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales.” This quote is popularly attributed to Albert Einstein.² The author Jean Houston often reports that he said a version of this directly to her when she was a child; in her telling, she is taken as a schoolchild to meet the rumped, socks-mismatched, kindly man and has a life-changing sidebar with him in which he reveals this great truth.³ In developing the **StoryCrafting** process, I came to heartily agree. While Einstein’s point was that creativity and imagination are far more important skills than math or science, my own perspective is that storytelling is, quite literally, the single most important thing that we humans do. It is the essential process of our own mind and interior world, and it is the essential mechanism through which we connect to other humans and the world itself. It is also the way we shape reality; this can be understood as a psychological reality or a quantum one. It is quite literally impossible to overestimate the power of story in our lives, and therefore it is subsequently impossible to overstate the value of crafting a story which communicates your vision to the people you hope to engage.

The **StoryCrafting** process focuses on a series of practical goals, which include:

² “Albert Einstein Quotes About Fairy Tales,” AZ Quotes, https://www.azquotes.com/author/4399-Albert_Einstein/tag/fairy-tale (August 23, 2021)

³ Jean Houston and Anneloes Smitsman, “The Lure of the Future Human,” Evolutionary Leaders Symposium 2021, July 8, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWmyv7EUW1c&t=177s>

- *Articulating the power of stories.* Change crafters need to understand the absolutely essential power of a transformational story.
- *Communicating core principles of stories designed to evoke change.* People need to be moved to action through understanding the urgency of the concern, but more importantly, how they are connected to the story, the storyteller, the “us” the story describes, and the future to which it points. They need to have a clear sense of how they can get involved, and how it connects to their own values, sense of meaning, and place in the world.
- *A reminder of the myriad ways in which humans can tell stories.* Stories are so central to the human experience that we are constantly crafting new ways to tell them. From cave paintings through the oral traditions of parable or ballad; through the printed word, poetry, photography, puppetry, monologue, play and film; to social media, Marco Polo, cartoonistry and beyond... there are more ways to tell a story than any one person can do on their own. A story crafter needs to consider carefully what forms of storytelling best might serve their goals and bring to bear their own gifts and talents or partner with others to bring their story to life.
- *The world needs **better stories**.* Although we live in a time suffused with storytelling media, many of our contemporary stories about the future are dystopian; our Western (and beyond) collective storytelling imagination has been captured by stories of terrible tomorrows, in which only the heroic few may survive. Our present is full of struggle, and stories can be a way to express our fear. Yet a better tomorrow is only possible when we can *see* it; therefore we need

storytellers who can cast a vision which inspires others to join in the work of building that better world. Every story speaks to struggle, and yet the world is just as filled with beautiful stories and incredible ideas and solutions as it is with danger and risk. Story crafters can help us dream and work for a brighter future “for the children of all species for all time.”⁴

My experience in ministry, life, and this research has led me to believe that our lives tell our stories most powerfully. It is helpful to have knowledge and insight to help us craft powerful stories and connect with others, but if our efforts do not align with our own sense of meaning and purpose, we are unlikely to be effective in creating change. Our stories will be hollow if we have no clear vision, and our efforts are likely to flag if they are not connected to our own deep sense of mission.

Therefore, the third aspect of *ChangeCrafting* work is **VisionCrafting**.

VisionCrafting is the work of discerning one’s own core values and personal mission, and from there, crafting a vision which can be shared; a core of self-knowledge that allows the change crafter to move in the world with clarity and authenticity. It is at this point in the *ChangeCrafting* process that the necessity of deeper self-reflection and personal meaning-making becomes evident. The

VisionCrafting principles are:

- *The importance of knowing oneself*. This is the foundation stone of *ChangeCrafting*. Without deep self-knowledge and an understanding of one’s values and life purpose, it is difficult to build or sustain change work. It is

⁴ William McDonough and Michael Braungart, *The Upcycle: Designing for Abundance* (New York, NY: Northpoint Press, 2013), dedication.

difficult to build or participate in community. It is difficult to handle difficult times, or thrive at any time. And yet, we are rarely taught how to discover this critical self-knowledge. **VisionCrafting** seeks to help bridge that gap.

- *Determining Core Values.* The first aspect of **VisionCrafting** is a Core Values exercise. The website process is an excellent first step, and yet, as I lead in-person workshops and refine along the way, I plan to incorporate additional practices drawn from Brené Brown's *Dare to Lead* work. Brown's research has shown that people (and thus, corporate cultures of most kinds) often have not clearly discerned their core values, and this can lead to ethical lapses and even self-loathing, as we accidentally betray our own vaguely-held values.⁵ There are other teachers and processes to determine core values, but the **VisionCrafting** process holds it as a core principle.
- *Crafting a Vision.* The **VisionCrafting** work on the *ChangeCrafting* website incorporates the work from John C. Maxwell's *Team: the 17 Indisputable Laws of Teamwork*, as well as inspiration from authors, artists and leaders. Crafting one's own vision is deeply personal. Process, encouragement and inspiration are the *ChangeCrafting* tools applied to **VisionCrafting**.
- *Focusing for mission.* A personal vision is the canvas. A *mission statement* is the snapshot that can help us introduce our vision and serve as a North Star as we navigate the many decisions of our daily lives. It helps us stay focused on our goals and priorities. A common concern among those who want to be

⁵ Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead: Brave Work, Tough Conversations, Whole Hearts*, (New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 2018, Kindle), p.187.

change crafters but struggle is the sense that there is no time, or that it is hard to determine what to do or when. Daily life often seems to interfere with accomplishing larger goals. This is a problem that arises when we have failed to seriously consider our vision, and do not know clearly our own mission. The **mission statement** workbook on the *ChangeCrafting* site is designed to provide a process for articulating a personal mission.

- *Things change.* A final point for **VisionCrafting** is a reminder that things change: people, circumstances, the world itself - especially we ourselves change. Our vision and sense of mission will need to change over time, as well. **VisionCrafting** proposes that the work of people like Joanna Macy and Ken Wilber, which encourages us to understand all progression as iterative and spiral, is helpful. Change crafters understand that it is part of the process to regularly revisit and revise our vision and mission in order to revive it.

The fourth element of *ChangeCrafting* work is **LifeCrafting**. This aspect of the work is focused on the spiritual, physical, and emotional well-being of the change crafter. As I described at the outset, a whole-person process places at the center a very real human being. We live in a time and those of us who live in the United States live in a place which places no priority on **well-being**. We suffer from the brutality of a kyriarchy, and we need strong practices of resistance just resistance just to survive. To thrive and create change requires the deep wisdom and practice of self and community care.

LifeCrafting is built on these foundational principles:

- *Self-care is essential.* Our consumer-based corporate capitalist culture has deformed our understanding of what “self-care” is. Self-care is not a product

or package you can buy; it is a resilience and resistance practice that re-centers our deep worthiness as human beings not because of what we do or what we produce, but because we **are**. Each of us is born with inherent worth and dignity, and self-care are the practices that restore to us that deep knowing.

- “*Rest is Resistance.*” Womanist and activist Trisha Hersey, founder of The Nap Ministry, is the primary articulator of the critical truth that especially for people of color and people whose lives and voices have been intentionally marginalized by the structures of power, rest is resistance. The power of the people to de-center production and to prioritize practices which support physical and mental health are radical acts of resistance and change crafting.
- *Joy is essential.* In a time when polarization has become the prevalent cultural media narrative, a time of pandemic and amidst the experience of the ravages of a changing climate, it is easy to believe that “reality” has determined grim fortitude to be the most appropriate state of being. Yet every generation has faced incredible challenges. As human beings, even in the direst circumstances, we can choose how we will face those struggles. If we understand how much power we regain when we choose to look for friendship, beauty, reasons to laugh, love and find joy, our experience can be transformed. Joy is essential.

LifeCrafting is the heart of *ChangeCrafting*, because we yearn to be and the world and work are best served by whole-hearted, resilient, compassionate people.

The last formal section of the *ChangeCrafting* website is **TheOdyssey**, which is of course a play on words, bringing the theological “sound” (theo) to the meaningfulness of the Hero’s Journey, as in Homer’s *The Odyssey*. That it also sounds like an invitation for us to understand why “God” ‘allows’ evil to exist is also inciting because we never want to help make big change unless we perceive big problems, and many of the problems we face carry at least a shadow of what might be called evil. Of course, depending on your theological perspective, you may flatly believe that things like persistent and systemic racism are evil, and the work of *ChangeCrafting* invites you into a process of better understanding how to resist it and redeem what is broken. If you do not use theological language, or your way of walking in the world is non-theistic, **TheOdyssey** still offers an invitation to you. Its premise is that we all seek meaning, and that meaning arises from some sense of a source that transcends the merely personal and individual. Whether we believe in a transcendent God or that we are part of a human community, our personal lives are embedded in greater wholeness.

TheOdyssey is more a reflection and invitation than a process, per se. Its principles are:

- *We all seek meaning.* As the storytelling, meaning-making animals, we also have some understanding of what Paul Tillich called the “Ground of Being-Itself,” or something that is our “ultimate concern.”⁶ Whether or not we call that God is irrelevant. What matters is that we seek to find sources of

⁶ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Three Volumes in One*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1967), p. 11.

meaning, and to create a cogent understanding of what is most meaningful in our lives.

- *The world is full of the work of those who have sought meaning before us.* As seekers of meaning, we have vast resources we may study. This abundance is both a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing because we have the benefit of so much wisdom and reflection; we are never alone in this work. A curse because if we do not know where to start, we can be utterly lost. **TheOdyssey** offers a resource for self-reflection to determine where one might begin.
- *The path to meaning includes practice.* All wisdom traditions encourage practice. This is because we understand that a human being is not a disembodied mind. Even when our path to meaning centers study and reflection, our whole-selves need embodied practice to be changed or even transformed by the meaning we discover. **TheOdyssey** encourages each person to discover what practice is meaningful to them, but also includes a book which offers nine different spiritual practices for the change crafter to consider.
- *The process of spiritual maturation never ends.* Within Unitarian Universalism, it is not uncommon for people to come to our faith tradition later in life, through a process of discovery (as opposed to being raised in the faith, for example). Particularly when people come to it from another faith tradition, they often believe that *discovery of* and *participation in* a Unitarian Universalist congregation is, itself, the end of the spiritual journey. Not so. Throughout our entire lifetime, up until the very last breath, we are called to

be spiritual seekers, maturing in our understandings and practices.

TheOdyssey process reminds change crafters to always remain spiritually curious and ready to change and grow into deeper forms of faith or understanding of meaning. Even those who have reached what we humans consider a *bodhisattva* or enlightened state do not stop learning, practicing and developing. If we have stopped moving along our path or believe we know all the answers now, we are mistaken – and are certainly not as spiritually mature as we might become.

With this articulation of the foundational principles and purpose of *ChangeCrafting*, we have the basic structure and much of the information and guiding process for the work. However, there are critical elements remaining. The first is that a website, book, or other informational material alone is never adequate for a truly transformational experience. This work is best undertaken with others and through a facilitated process. One of the final iterations of the background work that led to the *ChangeCrafting* website and expanded process was leading a six-month facilitated online course called “ChangeMakers,” with a cohort of 16 people. This course was publicized beforehand at The Unitarian Church of All Souls and openly on social media. Included in the cohort were ministers from various religious traditions, lay activists who were involved in religious community, and those who did not consider themselves “religious”/attend a congregation or spiritual community. They were different ages, races, from around the country and one person who did not identify as American, although she was currently living in the U.S. All were interested in being more effective change

makers. We met twice a month; once for two hours, and a second time for an hour. I crafted an intentional process which included:

- *A covenant* – guidelines and an explicit agreement for how we would build community together; we used the Vision, Inc. *8 Guidelines for Equity and Inclusion*⁷
- *Emphasis on building community* – we held our relationships with one another as primary, and began each session with some time to briefly check in to see how everyone was doing, and a longer time with opening exercises and dyad or small group conversations to build connections;
- *Anti-racism and equity/inclusion as a core principle* – we were explicit in our work, with this as a lens on both what we learned and how we engaged our work together;
- *Focused openings and closings* – these were readings, music, or meditations intended to allow participants to set down the tumult of the day and arrive fully in the present moment of our time together;
- *Thoughtful pacing* – intentional pacing, both slower but also sometimes faster, to underscore not merely information itself, but that the process is itself a learning experience.

The group believed that even in a virtual (Zoom) space, they developed community. Since being part of a community is central to the *ChangeCrafting* principles, this is something I feel was an important success. However, my presentation of material

⁷ “Widening the Circle of Concern, Getting Started,” Unitarian Universalist Association. <https://www.uua.org/widening/getting-started> (Jan. 4, 2021).

over time, though prepared, was too atomized, and overall I felt that it faltered in some essential way. As I reflected, with participants and in the development of the website format and paper, I determined that what the original course lacked was a clarity of *theological principle* and *guiding philosophical structure*. In my attempt to craft something for “all audiences,” I also stumbled in my own process: revisiting and revising led to the *ChangeCrafting* process you see on the website and in this paper. I have now articulated core principles, and the information and process are organized around the guiding philosophical structure of “crafting,” turning one’s **whole** self to a process of creation which now explicitly includes building community and includes reflection on questions of core values and self-care. It also can now be engaged as a self-guided process, outside of enrolling in a facilitated experience.

The course as I led it allowed the participants to build such community as our virtual presence allowed; I believe that for many, there can be significant improvements when this work can be practiced by people who can gather in person. When we gather in person we can bring our full and embodied experience to the work, adding touch and movement as well as many different kinds of practice beyond what we can do via video. I also believe that there will be additional power when people who have ongoing and direct relationships can come together to do this work; for example, people living in a particular city, or coworkers, or people engaged in a specific change work or organization. The more common the threads between people engaged in *ChangeCrafting*, the more powerful the experience over time, and the more opportunities to build true community: the kind of community that can learn and practice how to be intentional in crafting their relationship model, working through differences and disagreements,

discovering how and when to compromise, celebrating success and also weathering disappointment or even failure. A widely diverse and physically dispersed online community that meets only three hours a month can provide useful information, touchstone relationships, and even laughter or inspiration, but it is largely unable to generate the kind of powerful human responsiveness that shared presence and common goals can. I very much look forward to finding ways to share this work in in-person settings and in places where in-person community can be formed more easily.

The author Richard Bach wrote, “We teach best what we most need to learn.”⁸ In life, in ministry and certainly in this process, I have always found this to be true. As I discovered I needed spiritual growth and to deepen my own spiritual maturity, I found my way to the Public Theology program at Drew. As I discovered that deep change work can only be done in context and with community, I worked to develop practices and processes that might guide me when I found myself in a new place, even one as large and potential daunting as New York City. As I studied the profound failures of at least three decades of climate “action,” I used my background in psychology and theology to assess what changes might be essential to gaining new ground. As a human being in love with other human beings, I felt passion to uplift ways of being and becoming that help us live, move and breathe wholeness; practices of profound *humanity*: rest, resilience, reflection, joy. All of these together, things I needed to learn, I was called to teach – because we teach best what we most need to learn.

⁸ Richard Bach, *Illusions*, (New York, NY: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing, 1984), p. 60.

I believe this work is important because we are at a crucial point in human history. The pace of change now vastly exceeds the human capacity to personally keep up; Moore’s law pointed out aspects of this as early as 1970, but it has only increased and expanded in the years since.⁹ As previously discussed, many people find the current age to be one of extraordinary anxiety and even existential threat; the challenges we face more clearly bring into question the survival of human life on Earth. Our challenges are extraordinary, and we need extraordinary response. Our responses to date have been insufficient. As both a public theologian and human being, I feel a profound calling to respond to these extraordinary challenges, and this work represents my best current attempt to do so. The call of this moment is not for extraordinary individuals, standing alone against the storm: it is increasing numbers of whole-hearted, resilient, and creative people coming together to build vibrant, responsive, and transformational communities. Less Odysseus and more Avengers – groups of people coming together to bring their gifts, talents, insights and even foibles to the altar of humanity, in service of a greater good. The *ChangeCrafting* process and website are intended to be a path forward, but that path will be transformed by the people who walk it, including myself. Iterative and spiral, the work is changed as it changes. It will never be “finished.”

My intention as this part of my own process ends is to find ways to bring *ChangeCrafting* to a larger audience. Even before its formal introduction to the world, I have been taken aback by some of the hunger for its lessons. I am planning a roll out that

⁹ Alison E. Berman and Jason Dorrier, “Technology Feels Like It’s Accelerating – Because It Actually Is,” *Singularity Hub*, March 22, 2016, accessed February 17, 2021, <https://singularityhub.com/2016/03/22/technology-feels-like-its-accelerating-because-it-actually-is/>.

includes reforming my professional social media presence to an educational and invitational node of connection, sharing some of the basic ideas and principles of *ChangeCrafting* and regularly providing a way for people to join directly in the work with me. The website stands as a resource center, and I am already contemplating what to add and how to expand it, especially in interactive features that allow community to form. I will be offering workshops to groups and coaching to individuals or teams, as much of the *ChangeCrafting* work comes to life quite differently in human interactive spaces rather than the relatively static medium of a website. A book has been suggested, which would allow me to genuinely expand on elements of my own passion and theology in ways that are not possible in the current formats. A book is also a potent form of public theology; a manifestation of witness to one's convictions that takes its place in the world, and thus takes on a life of its own as it is discovered and integrated into different minds and practices. I will integrate this public theology in my practice of ministry in new ways; preaching but also allowing it to be that vision which is my own North star, and to live out my mission: *I am a change crafter, called to help build resilient, creative and vital people and communities so that all we love might be saved.*

When I was in my first year in seminary at Starr King School for the Ministry, I was incredibly fortunate to take a class with Joanna Macy, who was a regular visiting professor. I was 26 years old, with an undergraduate degree in psychology and women's studies, and the billowing confidence of the convert (to ministry). Macy's original work was called "despair work," because it dealt with our human, emotional response to climate change. Macy taught from her own experience of having had a mental breakdown over her own despair at what is happening to our Earth home. In her class, she required

that we have a partner and engage a formal spiritual practice of meditation; she began classes intentionally, with centering practice, and her work largely focuses on experiential exercises; everything from guided meditations, to interactive improv-style practices, to things like “the Elm dance” - a circle dance centered on taking the perspective of elm trees moving in the wind. While she conveyed a prodigious amount of educational material, none of it was offered simply to our minds: it was whole-self, integrated practice.

My 26-year-old self was appalled by the encouragement to “feel our despair;” the psychology undergraduate student in me imagined that I somehow knew better, and that this was a dangerous exhortation. (I argued openly with her about it.) As a student of theater, I was comfortable with the improv-style exercises, and that eager ministry student was willing to be open with others. This class, in my first year of seminary, might have been the point at which I began actively neglecting my own spiritual practice, because I focused so intently on creating for other people their opportunities for spiritual practice; I did an intensely mediocre job of following through with the meditation practice which was required. Hindsight and longer experience have shown me how detrimental this is to not only effective ministry, but also being fully alive and connected to the people we love, the causes which touch us, and our most meaningful experiences of life.

Twenty years of ministry and a doctoral program later, I look back on this experience and see plainly that almost everything I have learned the hard way, Joanna Macy had offered to us graciously and generously in my very first semester of seminary. We must feel **all** our feelings – and process them, with the support of a community and

those trained to help – in order to be whole. We cannot do any meaningful work alone; we need partners. Our own wellbeing depends on our practices of wholeness. Since developing the *ChangeCrafting* process, I have not passed one day without beginning in meditation, prayer, and written reflection. We cannot do everything; our work must be centered on that which matters most to us. For me, it is now *ChangeCrafting*, a work that I hope will inspire and empower people to pursue the world they dream of, as whole and healing people thriving in communities of justice and joy.

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