

1. TRANSFORMATION

The small band of terrorists moved slowly toward Damascus. They were on a search-and-destroy mission. Having killed before, they would readily do it again ... What happened next would change the course of human history.

Suddenly, a blinding flash of light appeared. Their leader, one Saul of Tarsus, heard a voice which said, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4) These words would change his life forever. This man would eventually become the greatest proponent of the very religion he sought to destroy. Historically, Saul is best known by his Roman name "Paul." Once a persecutor of Christians, he went on to become one of Christianity's greatest advocates.

It is one of history's greatest ironies that one who fanatically opposed the new movement would go on to teach, preach, and promote this same movement with tireless zeal and dauntless courage. Paul's efforts would deeply impact the lives of more than a billion people throughout the next 2,000 years.

Most of us are not as fanatical as Paul was, and perhaps have no desire to be as Paul became, yet few of us cannot but be impressed by the power of the transformation that took place in his life. Not all transformations are as dramatic or historically impactful as was Paul's. Most transformative experiences are more gradual and less visible to an outsider. Yet the power of this experience cannot be overstated. A life transformed is radically different from one's former life: One's sense of self has radically shifted; one's values and priorities have been radically redefined. A life transformed is lived with radically new meaning and sense of purpose. It is a life that is lived originally.

In this chapter, we will explore the topic of transformation. We look at what it is, what it means, and if it is even possible to us ordinary individuals. We begin with a dictionary definition that says to transform is “to change the condition, nature, or function of something ...” I use *transformation* to mean all of this, and to mean it in a very deep and personal sense. I use this term to mean *self-transformation*: The transformation of the self.

Transformation is a radical shift in one’s identity and one’s worldview. It is a shift in consciousness to a much larger and deeper view of oneself and of the universe. It is a quantum leap into a new way of being. It is awakening to an entirely new reality, to an authentic and an original life. It always contains the experience of greater freedom, power, and love than hitherto could be imagined.

Transformation is an internal and invisible process, but it ultimately impacts the visible and external aspects of our life: Our health, our relationships, and our work. Every facet of our being in the world is deeply impacted by this internal shift.

No two transformative experiences are exactly alike, yet there is a common denominator in every such experience: One’s identity is no longer fixated on a separated isolated self that is preoccupied with its own needs and interests. We experience an increased sense of freedom, a new sense of purpose, and a sense of fearlessness. Our morals and values become internalized and are less defined by others or by the culture. And yet, we become exquisitely sensitive to the well-being of others. This sensitivity emanates from a genuine compassion rather than from an ego-centered need to be liked, to be good, or to belong.

Transformation means discovering a whole new dimension of reality. Imagine you live in a two-dimensional world. Your entire sense of reality is confined to east and west, north and south—you know nothing else. Then suddenly, you hear a voice from a three-dimensional being who tells you to “move up-

ward." This makes no sense to you! You say, "Upward? Speak to me in English! Do you mean east, west, north, or south? There is nowhere else to go! *Upward* has no meaning to me!" The third dimension would be beyond the scope of our understanding.

The experience of transformation cannot be fully understood by anyone unaware of this dimension. Throughout history, sages and mystics have been met with scorn and skepticism. It is like trying to explain the color red to a man that was blind since birth. If there is no internal recognition of a word, all descriptions are for naught.

We cannot adequately describe transformation in words, but we can describe a path that can lead to transformation. We cannot adequately describe the color red to the blind man, but perhaps we can help him gain his sight so that he may experience the color red directly and personally. This is the purpose of all transformational spiritual practice.

Transformation vs. Translation

We usually find transformational teachings within the genre of spiritual or religious teachings. Transformation is always spiritual, but it is not necessarily religious in nature. Religious language and imagery is often used to describe many transformational experiences, but certainly not all of them. Transformation can also be described in psychological or in scientific language, but it is most often described by parable, poetry, art, or music.

All transformation is inherently spiritual in nature, but not all teachings identified as "spiritual" are necessarily transformational. There are many spiritual teachings that do not point to a new reality or a new identity. Their aim is for the individual to function better within the existing self/reality system. These may be called *translational* teachings; they seek to improve our life rather than to transform it.³ Rather than point to another

dimension, they point to new possibilities within the known dimensions of life.

Translational teachings have been helpful to many people. They can help to make life work better. They can help us to develop better relationships, better health, and more prosperity. And perhaps more important, they often provide a source of comfort and consolation amid the difficulties of life.

But for some, self-improvement and consolation is not enough. More than comfort and consolation, they want complete freedom, unconditional peace of mind, and the experience of a deeper reality. For these individuals, our everyday reality is seen as a dream state, and they seek to awaken from the dream, rather than simply improve upon it.

Translational teachings strive to make the ego more comfortable and more in control. But transformational teachings challenge the arrogance and the delusions of the ego; they turn its world upside down and inside out. One well-known Buddhist teacher would often say, "From the perspective of the ego, this journey is just one insult after another!" Such is the nature of transformation!

Yet many of us would rather be insulted by reality than comforted by our delusions. Having experienced the egocentric life and found it to be wanting, we prefer truth to comfort, reality to consolation. Finding the former icons of comfort and security to be very hollow, we feel guided by an internal longing for the unnamed and the unknown. It would seem something in us has shifted. We don't know why, how, or where it will lead us—but we are willing to follow it.

That which calls us may be called the ever-present origin, the ground of being, true nature, higher power, Christ within, or a variety of other names. Whatever we call it, it is infinitely more real than the egoic self. Although it makes no promises, we can

sense that it beckons us to a new life; we sense a new reality latent at our core.

This beckoning is the call to transformation. It can become very strong and persistent; yet we always have a choice in how we respond. We are never coerced; but once we discover this pearl, we are never the same. In the Gospel of Matthew, we find the parable of a merchant searching for pearls. The merchant finds one pearl of great value. So great is its value that he sells everything he owns in order to purchase it.⁴

To “sell all that we own” is not easy, but when we consider the deeper meaning of this parable, we see that it ultimately means to let go of all our attachments—both external and (more important) internal. We must eventually release all we believe we are. Shedding our material possessions is of little value if we remain attached to our present sense of selfhood.*

This call to a new life is the call to a new form of humanity—one that is no longer motivated by self-centered interests. Yet it is not simply altruism or “doing good” toward which the new life is calling. Rather, it is to go beyond our self as we are now, because we intuitively know we truly *are more* than we have previously experienced ourselves to be.

We are being called to go beyond our self not because this self is bad, but because we are being called to *grow up*. Our present egoic level of development was never meant to be the final stage of our evolution. This present stage is a bit like adolescence—necessary, but not a good place to stay! If our current level of development was meant to be the end of our evolution, then the human race may have been doomed from the start, because we cannot sustain 7 billion self-centered egos on this

*My experience is that when we let go of the internal attachments, we may not always need to let go of the externals, but ironically, *we may need to lose the external attachment in order to let go of an internal attachment*. Eventually, we learn we will have all we need (externally) if there is no (internal) attachment to any of it. “But **seek first his kingdom** and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well” (Mt. 6:33).

planet! Like a plague of locusts, we are destroying the very resources that give us our life.

Translational teachings are aimed at finding a new and more functional image of one's self, whereas transformation is about transcending all self-images. Transformation is the freedom to function beyond the confines of any fixed identity.

We typically carry an image of what we wish to become. But in the transformational journey, it's important not to be attached to any image of what we seek to become. *What we are looking for is that which is looking.* What we become is what we have always truly been—yet have never known.

Transformation may be likened to seeing our Earth from outer space. In a way, we are seeing Earth for the very first time. We see it every day, but from a very limited point of view. We stand upon it, but we do not really see it because our perspective is too small. From outer space we see the immensity and the beauty of that which we have always stood upon but have seldom recognized. With transformation we see the power and the beauty of that which we have always been living in and upon: the ever-present origin; the ground of all that exists.

The Role of Personal Will

A question inherent in this discussion is whether or not transformation is something one can make happen. Can we will it to occur? The answer seems to be “no”; however, having the desire for transformation is an essential ingredient. Desire may be necessary, but it alone is not sufficient.

Egocentric desires typically arise from a sense of deficiency and from resistance to our present experience: “I desire food because I am hungry; I desire a friend because I am lonely.” It may attempt to approach transformational practice with this very same attitude. The ego can believe it wants transformation because it secretly believes that “when I am transformed I will

have no more problems, no more pain, and will always feel safe and comfortable.” Transformation becomes one more strategy the ego employs to feel safe, comfortable, and in control.

One of the essential elements in spiritual practice is “right intention.”⁵ It’s very important to ask, “Does this intention arise from the authentic self or from the ego?” Discernment of desire is an essential element of any transformational spiritual practice. Desire for transformation is necessary to provide the motivation to engage spiritual practice; however, it is also necessary to surrender our attachment to the object or the image of our desires.

Surrender is also an essential part of transformational practice. Surrender is not to anything or anyone outside of our self; it is surrendering to our own authentic self. Most of our resistance to surrender is unconscious. When we consciously choose to surrender, we will begin to see subconscious resistance arise, and we soon see the myriad ways in which we deceive ourselves. We begin to see that resistance and deception is the foundation of the ego itself!

The ego can sometimes act like it has completely surrendered—but then it wants to be at its own funeral, delivering its own eulogy! We may find our self secretly striking a bargain: “Yes, I will surrender completely because that’s the best way to get what I want.” True surrender is not instrumental; it is not for the purpose of gaining anything that we don’t already have.

Honesty is an essential ingredient on this path. It can sometimes take brutal honesty to look at the subtle ways that we deceive ourselves—and perhaps deceive others as well. True surrender cannot occur without complete honesty, and complete honesty cannot occur without genuine right intention.

Personal will plays a paradoxical role in transformation. We cannot be transformed simply through willpower, yet we must be willing to allow transformation to occur. Paradoxically, we

must have the “will to surrender our will,” but we cannot force surrender to occur, any more than we can force transformation to occur.

And yet we should not sit idly and just wait for transformation to happen. Like the farmer, we cannot force the seeds to grow, but we can plant the seeds and cultivate the proper conditions for the ripening and the flowering of transformation. Spiritual practice is the way we “cultivate the soil” for transformation to blossom.

Paul’s Teachings on Transformation

Let us now return to the apostle Paul for some clues on how we may cultivate our transformation.⁶ In his letter to the Galatians, Paul writes, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). Transformation involves a crucifixion of one’s former egocentric self and a rebirth to the Christ within—our true nature. Obviously, Paul was not referring to a physical crucifixion. He was instead referring to a symbolic death, the death of an egocentric way of life. The self-centered, self-serving personality is crucified, or crossed out, and a new self emerges.

Jesus referred to this principle when he said to his disciples, “He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it” (Mt. 10:39). This enigmatic statement refers to a form of giving up or losing one’s personal life and then finding and living from the life of the Christ within, which is the universal life—the life abundant. Transformation involves the sacrifice of the particular for the universal, the limited for the unlimited, the temporal for the eternal.

In Paul’s letter to the Romans, he writes, “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (12:2). He echoed a similar teaching

in his letter to the Ephesians: “Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (4:22-24). In both teachings, Paul refers to the “renewing of the mind” and herein lies another key to transformation.

To renew the mind, Paul tells us, is to conform no longer to the appearances and the beliefs of this world. He tells us that we must release the old nature, for it is “corrupt through deceitful lusts.” This is far more than a teaching of morality. It is a teaching of radical transformation—a complete shift in one’s level of being. The old nature is corrupt in that it does not know the truth; it conforms to the world of appearance and illusion. The old nature is corrupt through “deceitful lusts.” This refers to the two characteristics of an ego-centered life: greed and delusion. To put off this old nature and to no longer conform to this world is to release our self-centered greediness and to give up our faith in the reality of appearances.

The old nature is self-centered, greedy, and lustful, because it is based on the premise that we are separated from the rest of life and from one another. This belief in separateness leads to a life based on “not-enough-ness.” Separation creates the fear of not doing enough, of not having enough, of not being enough. Greed arises from this fear. Yet the truth is that if we live in the experience of separation, we can *never* do enough, have enough, or be enough. Humans have exploited the earth and each other for many thousands of years in a vain attempt to fill the emptiness created from their belief in separation.

The old nature is delusional. It believes that it sees reality, yet what it sees is the product of its own imaginings. In the unawakened state, we don’t see things as they are; we see things as we are. We project onto the world around us the images that

lurk within the shadows of our own minds. Unmindful of the self-created demons within us, we project them onto our environment. Then, like Don Quixote, we spend our time “doing battle with windmills,” convinced of our own rightness and righteousness.

Yet it is important that we not judge the ego as evil or bad, for it is not. A caterpillar is not bad simply because it does not have the freedom or the beauty of the butterfly. A child is not bad just because he or she does not have the knowledge or the strength of an adult. One of the steps in the transformative process is to appreciate the life we’ve lived until now and know that every experience was necessary to bring us to this point of readiness for transformation.

“Do not be conformed” means much more than superficially embracing nonconformity or simply rebelling against tradition or authority. Such a rebellion may be an attempt to become free of the shackles of limitation, but mere rebellion simply substitutes one form of bondage for another. To become a true nonconformist is to step outside the delusions that keep us in bondage. A true nonconformist demonstrates how to live originally.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote:

It is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.⁷

This is the nature of true nonconformity. To not be conformed to the world is to have the courage to trust our own intuition, even if it conforms not to the teachings of this world’s authorities. It means to put faith in our inner knowing of truth more than to succumb to the voice of authority and, perhaps, even to the voice of reason.

Reason can certainly serve a useful purpose, yet it can easily be duped if it is divorced from the heart. For many years “reasonable” men have argued for the necessity of slavery, for the oppression of women and children, and for the exploitation of our environment.

Emerson also wrote:

A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his. In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty.⁸

True genius is simply having the courage and the faith to live outside the mind that is conforming to this world and to live within the transformed mind that is “created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

To appreciate the life we have lived and to see it as the foundation for the next stage of our journey is to take a major step in preparing for transformation. To have the courage and the faith to trust in and live from the intuitive voice within is to take another step. This is the beginning of “the renewing of the mind.”

Adversity and Transformation

Sometimes adversity prepares us for transformation. To be sure, adversity in and of itself does not necessarily transform us. But when we meet adversity with a clear mind and an open heart, the adverse experience can serve as a catalyst for opening us to deeper levels of self than might normally be possible. When we face adversity with awareness, acceptance, and appreciation, we release layers of the old nature, the old mind, and facilitate the awakening of the new Mind—the Christ within.

The death of the old self, always a prelude to transformation, is often catalyzed by some adverse experience in our lives. To the old self, the ego, something is drastically wrong! We may want to do anything but face the challenge that lies before us. When we feel stretched beyond our limits or feel defeated beyond any human capacity to recover, we are ripe for transformation. An old proverb says that man's extremity is God's opportunity. When the human ego feels crushed and crucified, the opportunity for transformation is at hand. Our work at this point is to surrender. In the garden of Gethsemane, just before his crucifixion, Jesus said, "My Father ... thy will be done" (Mt. 26:42). This is what we are to do.

This surrender, however, is not done with an attitude of resignation or despair, but with an attitude of self-awareness, acceptance, and appreciation. We cannot be forced into transformation. We must go willingly—indeed, joyfully. To see adversity as a gift is to ready oneself for transformation. This is not easy to do. When we are caught up in appearances and in strong emotions, appreciating the big picture is difficult. When we are caught up in great pain or fear, it seems that nothing matters but getting out of it! Yet if we have the courage to keep our hearts and minds open to the possibility of the greater freedom that is incipient within the challenge itself, we are opening the door to a greater reality.

Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D., tells of a woman who had lived most of her life in bitterness and isolation from others. While having a bone marrow transplant, she found herself filled with anger, envy, and resentment. She was overwhelmed by self-pity and experienced a sense of isolation so profound that it was beyond words. She had never before let herself feel at this depth.

As she surrendered into this experience and allowed it to burn away the beliefs that separated her from others, it left her with an unshakable sense of belonging and connection to all

life. She had found her way to the simplicity of an open heart and from this came an enduring inner change and a natural open-hearted kindness toward others.⁹

Awareness, acceptance, trust, and appreciation are all attitudes that ripen us for transformation. This is especially so when we can continue to maintain these qualities of mind and heart during times of adversity. To be “crucified with a smile on our face” is extremely powerful and, in a certain sense, is necessary for transformation.

This is *not* to advocate martyrdom, victimhood, or self-punishment; that does not prepare us for transformation. However, when life brings adversity unbidden, it is very important that we not react with resistance and judgment. “Not my will, but thine, be done” (Lk. 22:42) is a very powerful prayer and one that prepares the way for the “renewing of the mind.”

Transformation is paradoxical. It is indeed “passing beyond” the self as it is, and yet in another sense, it is simply becoming more of what one already is. We can see it as a process of transcendence—moving beyond; yet we can also see it as a deepening—moving into the very nature of our own being and living fully and creatively from that deeper nature. In either way of seeing it, transformation is a movement, a quantum leap, into a new way of life, a new way of being.

Having discussed the nature of transformation, we now turn our attention to the process of cultivating the soil for transformation via spiritual practice.