

Soul Matters, October 2013

What Does it Mean to Live a Life of Transformation?

October is a month of transformation. The weather is changing, the temperature is dropping, snow is falling on the mountains. Leaves are turning color and falling. We are putting away our summer clothes and pulling out the sweaters. We can see and feel the transformation as the cycle of the year turns.

We are also transforming all the time, deliberately, or not. As we age from infants to children to youth to adults, we transform rapidly, learning and growing constantly. As adults, those obvious transformations slow down, but transformation nevertheless happens. We learn from our mistakes. We take classes to expand our minds and learn new skills. We seek out a therapist to help us transform old patterns into new behaviors.

Our bodies change, too, slowly –and perhaps not as we would wish – but learning to live with these changes is a transformation, too. We acquire memories and a wealth of information, and hopefully, become wise. Our relationships change throughout our lives with work and play and family – transformed by births and deaths, marriages and divorces, new jobs and retirement, health and illness.

What are the moments of transformation that stand out for you? I decided I was an adult when I was 19 years old and started paying my own dental bills. That was a transforming moment. Another occurred when I turned 50, and had a sudden feeling of freedom from restrictions I had lived under all my life; I could speak my truth and take the consequences. Having a baby was transformative, of course. And becoming a minister. I am currently in a transformation as I adjust to my 'baby' having gone off to college.

Transformation is often not easy or painless or quick. Sometimes we really have to work for what we want. Sometimes we have to hit rock bottom before we are ready to transform. Grief over loss can be transformative, if we allow ourselves to mourn and move through it, not just avoid it.

We actually do live lives of transformation all the time. The question is, are they positive transformations, or negative ones? And can we transform the negative ones into positive ones? Like Candice Lightner, whose 13-year-old daughter was struck and killed by a drunk driver, but who went on to found MADD, Mothers Against Drunk Drivers. We have the power to transform.

May all your transformations be blessed ones. ~ *Beatrice*

Soul Matters is the creation of the Rev. Scott Taylor, First Unitarian Church of Rochester, New York. This month's Soul Matters packet on Transformation is from Rev. Scott and Rev. Beatrice Hitchcock, with contributions from High Plains Church members.

QUESTION TO WRESTLE WITH

Whose Story is True? Walt Disney's or the Brothers Grimm?

We all know the story of the frog prince. Or at least we think we do. A toad is ugly and miserable. A princess comes along with a kiss. Toad transforms into Prince. Everyone lives happily ever after. The catch is, this isn't the original but a Disney version. The original was written by the famous fairy-telling siblings, the Brothers Grimm. They had a somewhat darker outlook on life than Walt and Mickey Mouse. In their version, the frog isn't transformed by a kiss but by hitting a wall. Splat!! That's right. Things don't go as the frog planned. The princess finds him disgusting, picks him up and winds up for a fast ball to the wall.

Now here's the interesting part. The frog has a last minute choice: he can cling to her hand and avoid being "splatted" or he can let loose and allow himself to smash against the wall. He chooses to let go and, to his surprise, he learns that what follows brokenness is not death but transformation. After falling from the wall to the ground, the frog wakes up to discover himself a prince.

So here are the questions: whose story rings most true to you? Whose story resonates with the story of your life, your transformations? Walt's version? Or the Grimm Brothers'?

How has transformation found its way into your life? By sweet kisses and the magic of being loved? Or through pain that surprisingly turned out to be "a gift"? Or a bit of both?

Do you think the Grimm's had a story worth telling, a lesson to teach? Does transformation sometimes require us letting go and allowing ourselves to be "splatted?"



SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

Choose one, two, three, or all of the exercises below. Bring the results to your Soul Matters group. This is not a competition. Do what you can do. That is enough.

1) I'M NOT WHO I ONCE WAS

Find a picture from a time in your life when you were “a different person than you are now.” Make sense of that phrase in any way that is meaningful to you. Maybe it’s a picture of you as a child with dreams that never came true—or weren’t ever pursued in the first place. Maybe it’s a picture of you at your “first” wedding or a picture of you as a rebel—one your friends now wouldn’t believe was really you. Maybe it’s a picture with a drink in your hand or a political button with some past politician’s face on it. Maybe it’s something you wrote a long time ago.

Put the picture in a place where you will look at it every day, at least for a few moments. Let your daily interaction with it help you think about that person’s relationship to your life now. What aspects of that person are you glad are in the past? What aspect would you like to reclaim? Do you feel like you know that person? Or does he or she seem a stranger? A mystery? A threat? Does that person reappear every once in a while? Has that person gone into hiding? Why? Whether you like that person or not, what gift did he or she give you?

2) Who Would You Like to Be?

Create a picture of a transformation you would like to make and show what that would look like. This can be done with any medium: pencil, paint, pen, collage, clay... You may use words to describe the pictures if you desire. Show yourself as you were, and as you would like to be. Do you want to become more courageous? What would that look like to you? Would you like to have more time for yourself? What would you do with that time?

3) Steps to Transformation

Since there is probably no fairy godmother waiting to transform you, what are the steps you need to take to create your own transformation? Break it down into manageable pieces. If you want to be more patient with your children, what can you do to give yourself that patience? When do you feel more patient? After a good night’s sleep, or following your spiritual practice, or talking with someone who’s “been there,” or...? If you have been abandoned, how do you want to transform the feelings you have about that into something positive? What would you like? Independence, courage, compassion? When have you felt those things? What do you need to do more of, or do differently, to have more of them and less of the feeling of abandonment? Write these down, or draw them on a set of stair steps or stepping stones, and begin to act on them.

4) Stuck in Transformation?

If you’ve had trouble creating transformation in your life when you wanted to, delve into your own history. What behaviors or beliefs have kept you stuck in the past? If you’ve wanted to be more courageous, for example, think about times when you were less than courageous. Write a history of these times; specific incidents are best. Most patterns of behavior are rooted in beliefs we have about ourselves. See if you can find and challenge those beliefs. They might be something like: “I always get tongue-tied when I’m challenged.” “I don’t know how to fight effectively” (verbally or physically.) “No one will take me seriously.” Then go back to # 3 and figure out the steps to transform yourself.

Recommended Resources

These are not “required reading.” They are simply meant to get your thinking started – and maybe to open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to live a life of transformation. If something particularly moves you, cut it out or copy it, and live with it for the month.

First comes thought; then organization of that thought, into ideas and plans; then transformation of those plans into reality. The beginning, as you will observe, is in your imagination.

Napoleon Hill, 20th century American author of personal success literature

When we quit thinking primarily about ourselves and our own self-preservation, we undergo a truly heroic transformation of consciousness.

Joseph Campbell, 20th century mythologist, writer, lecturer

There are many going afar to marvel at the heights of mountains, the mighty waves of the sea, the long courses of great rivers, the vastness of the ocean, the movements of the stars, yet they leave themselves unnoticed!

Saint Augustine, 4th/5th century CE Bishop of Hippo (Annaba, Algeria)

How should we be able to forget those ancient myths that are at the beginning of all peoples, the myths about dragons that at the last moment turn into princesses; perhaps all the dragons of our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us once beautiful and brave. Perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being something helpless that wants help from us.

So you must not be frightened if a sadness rises up before you larger than any you have ever seen; if a restiveness, like light and cloud shadows, passes over your hands and over all you do. You must think that something is happening with you, that life has not forgotten you, that it holds you in its hand; it will not let you fall. Why do you want to shut out of your life any uneasiness, any miseries, or any depressions? For after all, you do not know what work these conditions are doing inside you.

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

Sorrow prepares you for joy. It violently sweeps everything out of your house, so that new joy can find space to enter. It shakes the yellow leaves from the bough of your heart, so that fresh, green leaves can grow in their place. It pulls up the rotten roots, so that new roots hidden beneath have room to grow. Whatever sorrow shakes from your heart, far better things will take their place.

Rumi, 13th-century Persian poet, theologian, and Sufi mystic

I never told a victim story about my imprisonment. Instead, I told a transformation story - about how prison changed my outlook, about how I saw that communication, truth, and trust are at the heart of power.

Fernando Flores, Chilean entrepreneur and politician

Darkness deserves gratitude. It is the alleluia point at which we learn to understand that all growth does not take place in the sunlight.

Joan Chittister, *Uncommon Gratitude*

At one time, Meadville Lombard Theological School (UU) had a slogan, "Transforming Ourselves to Transform the World." The wisdom in this quote is immense. It says that we can be more whole, more loving, more compassionate, more courageous, and happier than we are today. And it says that we aren't merely seeking our own spiritual growth, but rather preparing ourselves to go out into a broken world and heal it.

High Plains Church member

Personal transformation can and does have global effects. As we go, so goes the world, for the world is us. The revolution that will save the world is ultimately a personal one.

Marianne Williamson, writer on spiritual, personal, and political issues

All of us can play an important part in the conquest of violence. We can do this by throwing our full weight behind peaceful, effective programs for eliminating the situations from which violence arises. But just as importantly, we need to do everything we can to remove every trace of hostility in ourselves.

The violence that is flaring up on our streets and in many corners of the world is the inevitable expression of the hostility in our hearts. Hostility is like an infectious disease. Whenever we indulge in a violent act or even in hostile words, we are passing this disease on to those around us. When we quarrel at home, it is not just a domestic problem; we are contributing to turmoil everywhere.

A teacher of meditation in ancient India, Patanjali, wrote that in the presence of a man or woman in whom all hostility has died, others cannot be hostile. In the presence of a man or woman in whom all fear has died, no one can be afraid. This is the power released in true nonviolence, as we can see in the life of Mahatma Gandhi. Because all hostility had died in his heart, he was a profound force for peace.

Ek Nath Easwaran, 20th century Indian-American spiritual leader

Changing is not just changing the things outside of us. First of all we need the right view that transcends all notions including of being and non-being, creator and creature, mind and spirit. That kind of insight is crucial for transformation and healing.

Thich Nhat Hanh, Vietnamese Buddhist monk, author, speaker

The future is not some place we are going, but one we are creating. The paths are not to be found, but made. And the activity of making them changes both the maker and their destination.

John Schaar, 20th century scholar & political theorist

Rituals, anthropologists will tell us, are about transformation. The rituals we use for marriage, baptism or inaugurating a president are as elaborate as they are because we associate the ritual with a major life passage, the crossing of a critical threshold, or in other words, with transformation.

Abraham Verghese, physician/author, Stanford University Medical Center

If the point of life is the same as the point of a story, the point of life is character transformation. If I got any comfort as I set out on my first story, it was that in nearly every story, the protagonist is transformed. He's a jerk at the beginning and nice at the end, or a coward at the beginning and brave at the end. If the character doesn't change, the story hasn't happened yet. And if story is derived from real life, if story is just condensed version of life then life itself may be designed to change us so that we evolve from one kind of person to another.

Donald Miller, *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years:
What I Learned While Editing My Life*

We need to realize that our path to transformation is through our mistakes. We're meant to make mistakes, recognize them, and move on to become unlimited.

Yehuda Berg, rabbi, co-director of the Kabbalah Centre

Should you shield the canyons from the windstorms you would never see the true beauty of their carvings.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, Swiss-American psychiatrist, expert in grief work

You can plant a church and grow a church. That's not that hard to do, but it's harder to be a viable source of transformation in a city or your time or space.

Erwin McManus, author, lecturer, pastor of Mosaic Church

Reorganization to me is shuffling boxes, moving boxes around. Transformation means that you're really fundamentally changing the way the organization thinks, the way it responds, the way it leads. It's a lot more than just playing with boxes.

Louis Gerstner, CEO of IBM 1993-2002

MOVIES

The Blind Side

Remember the Titans