

Transform Self-Centered People into Other-Centered People, and Other-Centered People into All-Centered People

Where there is not love, put love, and you will find love. – St. John of the Cross

What would you do if you knew how to transform people? Would you make the effort?

The choice

Many people strive for gradual improvement rather than transformation or radical change. To use the analogy of a radio, it's like spending more energy trying to turn up the volume or adjust the tuning, when you could be changing the station to something completely different, something more refreshing and life-giving.

The choice being considered here is transformation: To trade in tools that manipulate or coax for tools that cause a jump to a whole new level of perception, action and being. To explain how the world often works, here is a passage inspired by a verse in the *Tao Te Ching*:

“Whenever transformation was unavailable to change people, we used kindness to influence them. When we ran out of kindness, we rewarded people with gifts when they behaved. When we had no more gifts to give, we appealed to people’s sense of fairness. When people would no longer be fair, we created laws. When the laws weren’t obeyed, we used force to make people change. When they didn’t submit to force, we killed them.”¹

¹ Here’s a translation of the actual Tao Te Ching passage (in section 38): “A man of the highest virtue does not keep to virtue and that is why he has virtue. A man of the lowest virtue never strays from virtue and that is why he is without virtue. The former never acts, yet leaves nothing undone. The latter acts but there are things left undone. A man of the highest benevolence acts, but from no ulterior motive. A man of the highest rectitude acts, but from ulterior motive. A man most conversant in the rites acts, but when no one responds, he rolls up his sleeves and resorts to force. Hence when the way was lost there was virtue; when virtue was lost there was benevolence; when benevolence was lost there was rectitude; when rectitude was lost, there were the rites.”

The trend in the verse is from transformation to killing; but we can reverse the order and change the way the world often works, moving from the lower to the higher sources of change. That's why this chapter is about opening yourself up to the highest level of change, transformation.

It makes sense to define transformation at this point. I'd like to use the notion of a continuum of change. On one end there is variety which involves superficial changes: You can change your hairstyle, the kind of fast food you eat, or the model of car you drive. These changes are not very deep, though they can give temporarily relief from boredom or an inner restlessness. Fluctuations in emotional states are usually temporary, too.

Next in depth comes personal improvement. These are improvements in particular aspects of your body or mind. You may acquire a new habit, for example, to decrease salt in your diet. You may learn a skill that affects a single area of your life, such as how to resolve a conflict. Improvements and habits are relatively permanent changes.

More profound than personal improvement is personal growth. Physical maturation is growth; not only does one get taller, but one's sexuality blossoms and one's mind changes. Attitudinal changes can also usually be considered growth. While people can work on themselves to produce changes in attitude, these changes often come through maturation and the passage of time. At other times they are adaptations to a changed social or physical environment.

At the pinnacle of change I would put transformation. There is a new self, or a radically different experience of reality. I would define transformation as a radical, new perspective and the energy to live it. Deep personal relationships can, over time, produce transformation. Some religious or spiritual experiences produce transformation. I think that changing one's *core* values would fall into the category of transformation while a maturation of values might be considered growth. One distinction between growth and transformation is that growth is often seen as the normal course of events. You expect people to grow and mature, but you don't expect transformation.

Before moving on, notice that the last three categories of the continuum of change involve learning. Even transformation is learning, since it produces a permanent change in behavior.

A Continuum of Personal Change

Variety -- Personal Improvement --- Growth ---- Transformation

Eighteen Sources of Transformation

So, what causes transformation? I'd like to lead off with a piece that I wrote several years ago:

On Caring: Great Four-Chambered Heart

Concern can be nurtured by continually allowing yourself to be: 1) personally affected by the victims of injustice and oppression; 2) inspired by advocates of peace (or other role models); 3) part of a community or group that gives you support; and 4) reflecting, praying or meditating on your personal role. This list is based on one in a booklet by Jim McGinnis called *Towards Compassionate And Courageous Action*

Reading his list thrilled me because it almost seemed like a recipe for creating perfect human compassion. If any one of the four ingredients were missing, the caring would not be grounded, would not be hopeful, would not be sustained, or would not be authentic. If you think about the list, all four are needed, like the four chambers of the human heart.

Some of these four forms of transformation can be communicated well in writing and some can't. Maybe you've experienced a sense of security and comfort as you go to a support group meeting where you know you'll be cheerfully and warmly greeted. But I can't communicate what it's like to be a poor parent in a developing nation, watching your sick child die of whooping cough, and knowing there's nothing you can do. Maybe you've been jolted awake by the words and deeds of an inspiring man or woman. But we can't know what it's like to be an oil-drenched Ring-necked duck or Harbor seal struggling for breath. Maybe you've experienced a clarity from silent meditation, or a

spirit of renewal from private prayer. But I can't tell you what it's like to be a child who's lost a leg to an abandoned land mine—to know you'll never be like the other children for the rest of your life.

But this is what my heart has taught me: These children are *my* children, both those who can run and those who can't. These animals are *my* animals, both those that can swim and those that can't. This Earth is *my* Earth—both the cancerous, polluted parts and the vigorous and blooming parts. And as long as I have two hands with which to operate, I am their 'surgeon' and protector.

Commentary

I like this article a lot, though I think that I got a little too rah-rah-rah at the end. I value it not only because it names four mechanisms of transformation, but because it implies that a balance of them is more complete and more perfect than any one of them. The article also underscores the importance of *experiencing* these mechanisms.

Since then, however, I've identified fourteen other mechanisms of transformation:

- God—While prayer and meditation and reflection on scripture obviously imply God, I feel a need to make special reference, especially since one could easily claim God as the ultimate source of all transformation.
- Education—While much of education causes improvement, certain kinds produce transformation. I'm especially thinking of the type Paulo Friere wrote about in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in which illiterate people are made conscious of how certain unexamined phrases and word connotations help maintain their passivity and acceptance of oppression.
- Profound insight—Insight sometimes happens in an educational setting, though not always. Sometimes we have certain realizations, "recognitions" that change our perspective and behavior forever.
- Personal relationships—There's a saying, "Ideas don't change people; people change people." Thus it should be noted that the Make a Friend—Be a Friend—Lift a Friend Higher Method can be a mechanism of transformation.

- Breakup or end of relationships—This is usually a source of negative transformation, but it sometimes leads to positive transformation and new capacity.
- Depression and other mental illness
- Chronic illness or disability
- Counseling, especially the kind that includes skilled, empathic listening.
- Crisis—Such as an earthquake or war, causing trauma or a breakthrough to increased capacity.
- Culture (1st definition)—Moving to a different country with a different language and set of values
- Culture (2nd definition)—Drinking deeply of literature, architecture, music and the other arts.
- Culture (3rd definition)—Organizational culture, especially of corporate advertising, mass media, and technology
- Your own death—Perhaps life’s greatest transformation
- An activated dream or vision.

When I earlier defined transformation as “a radical, new perspective and the energy to live it” I should have mentioned that I was thinking of positive transformation. In cases of relationship breakup, depression, or crisis, it seems that energy is suddenly withdrawn. But things that we consider negative such as disability, the end of a relationship, or personal crisis sometimes eventually provoke a radical *positive* rearrangement of the self. Many people become crushed or depressed by hardship, but some are mysteriously transfigured or awakened.

Valuing transformation but being wary of it

Beyond the subjective experience of being transformed itself, its greatest value is that it’s enduring. For instance, I never expect to see a billboard or a magazine ad that reads, “Please keep kissing those you like to kiss!” I say this because once people discover the pleasures of kissing, they no longer need to be persuaded. That’s the advantage of

transformation over persuasion. Advertisers need to keep up a constant barrage of ads to make us buy their products, but God doesn't need to lease billboard space saying, "Go forth and multiply!" Somehow, we've already warmed up to the concept. Once you get a new perspective, you rarely go back to the old one.

The least-likely candidates for transformation are the ones who have already undergone some other transformation. Those people who think they've found "it" whether "it" be romance, parenthood, the stock market, one's mission in life, or true religion are much less likely to be open to more transformation. And, as we all know, recent converts are the worst. Partly it's because they're currently experiencing great fulfillment and are not yet bored with the change, but it's also due to the pride involved in believing that they've no more significant growing or learning to do, having "arrived."

The ultimate self-transformation, perfection, usually comes in pieces. One of the greatest errors we can make is to mistake one piece for the whole. Even my solution that generates other solutions is not learned in one step. And the people who have become enthralled with one solution, one cause, or one mission in life are often the first to reject my solution that generates other solutions.

How to avoid pseudo-transformation and pick up the scent of real transformation

I can easily give you some simplistic formulas for transformation: "Just stay in contact with suffering people and you'll be transformed." "Learn the Frierean process of 'Appreciation'²" "Work with inspiring people." "Make a Friend. Be a Friend. Lift a Friend Higher." But just as a person's physical growth requires a variety of nutrients, vitamins and minerals, each form of transformation requires certain ingredients and preparation. So these are only partial recipes.

Even growing crops is tricky because it means preparing the ground, removing weeds, fertilizing the soil, and having enough water and sunlight. And the amount, timing and placement of seeds, fertilizer and water are crucial. Transformation is even trickier because in many cases we don't have a complete formula or complete control of the transforming event or factors. We may have the ground, but not the seed. Or have the

² As described in Paulo Friere's book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

seed of a vision, but not know the nutrients that will make it spring up and come alive. Transformation is not something you have control over. It's not like a pill that you take. It's something bigger that you must dive into like the ocean or a hurricane. It moves you; you don't move it.

Nevertheless there are things that we can do to make transformation more likely. The first is to give up pseudo-transformation. All of the other means in *Tao Te Ching* – inspired passage quoted earlier, such as kindness, appeals to fairness, tradition, law, and the use of force can be considered pseudo-transformation. While they may have their place, they have their limits as well.

On a personal level, listening to a motivational speaker or your absolute favorite music can produce a sense of transformation, but it quickly fades. Singing hymns or reading moving religious passages produces temporary emotional states that people confuse with spiritual ones. After watching a two-hour documentary on Picasso, I couldn't help feeling that his insatiable drive to produce art was related to an unfulfilled desire for personal transformation. He could render "transformation" on the canvas, but he could never bring it *inside* himself. And once each artwork was completed, he was driven to create again. From this perspective, you could say that all his greatest works of art were barriers to personal growth. He single-handedly transformed the world of art but couldn't or wouldn't transform himself.

A first step toward transformation is to first give up pseudo-transformation to make room for real transformation. This means letting go of temporary solutions. It often means experiencing emptiness and need. Then it involves observing life, trying to pick up the scent or trail, and finding a "teacher" in one of the eighteen sources of transformation listed above.

Most things in life lack the potential to transform. But certain things give hints or clues about transformation. Compare these two passages about caring for the Earth:

"We shall foster the equitable sharing of God's gifts of creation and the building of community in order to help meet the critical needs of the majority of the human family that is poor and oppressed. We shall assist our members to move toward sustainable personal and corporate lifestyles that will restore

and protect all of God's creation." – Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Common Affirmation on Global Hunger, 1991

"Every part of this soil is sacred in the estimation of my people. Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove, has been hallowed by some sad or happy event in days long vanished...The very dust upon which you now stand responds more lovingly to their footsteps than to yours, because it is rich with the blood of our ancestors and our bare feet are conscious of the sympathetic touch...And when the last Red man shall have perished, and the memory of my tribe shall have become a myth among the White Men, these shores will swarm with the invisible dead of my tribe...At night when the streets of your cities and villages are silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts who once filled and still love this beautiful land." – Chief Seattle, 1854

To me the contrast is breathtaking. The first passage seems devoid of life, as if crafted by bureaucrats or lawyers who were well-intentioned but had no authentic experience of nature, or who were ashamed of any they did have. The second passage speaks from the heart. The first passage is like that of a steward, a placeholder, a stand-in, or someone once removed from reality. The second passage is that of a lover. Who do you think would be more committed to the Earth? Who do you think would be more in tune with the Earth's needs? It is striking and tragic that the first passage comes almost 150 years *after* the second and yet it's more primitive and feeble.

But there's great news here for some one looking for clues. Those on the trail of transformation could ask themselves, "In what ways did Chief Seattle *live* his life differently that committee of Presbyterians? And what could *I* experience that would be closer to what Chief Seattle experienced?" Even 150 years later the trail still hasn't grown completely cold. There are probably still enough clues in the records of Native Americans and others to put yourself on the path of this particular form of transformation, becoming an active lover of the natural world.

Note that if I merely relished Chief Seattle's prose for the poetic feeling that it gave me, it would be merely pseudo-transformation. If I mustered a teardrop or two and fantasized about silently canoeing down a scenic river, it couldn't motivate ongoing action. But if I used the same passage for something other than emotional consumption, it

could give me hints and lead me to a true transformation, if it instilled in me a hunger for nature and inspired me to experience something new.

That's the first step. Usually I must experience a transformation before inviting others to it. If I didn't, I could be considered a hypocrite or a fake. Moreover, without going through the transformation myself, I probably wouldn't have the intuitive abilities to prepare the person for the event, or the event for the person.

But true transformation is often scary because it involves changing your *self*. Reciprocally, a static or limited self-image is a barrier to transformation. If you define yourself a certain way and consider yourself fixed, then you are keeping yourself closed down and aren't open to change.

My transformation process

My personal transformation began with a search for a better way to address hunger. Then came a crisis when I realized that conventional methods could never adequately address hunger or any of the world's life-destroying problems. This realization forced me to look for a completely different approach.

Earlier I mentioned my breakthroughs, the Ladder of Empowerment and the life-support systems approach to peace. I had goose bumps and a feeling of elation when I realized the incredible power and speed that a chain reaction has to change life on Earth.

Although these insights were not real transformation, they led me to begin a process of lifestyle change, to live out my own one sixth-billionth of the solution. One of these changes was to become more active politically, since I realized that politics could not be ignored. I also began making regular donations to development and ecological agencies, seeing it not as charity but as a self-tax to offset how I was destabilizing the world economically and environmentally with my lifestyle. Every four months I set new goals and made further stretches toward this more world-sustaining lifestyle and toward promoting a chain reaction.

One day, about two years later, when I was writing out some checks to charities, it hit me that a variety of lifestyle changes had become second nature to me. I realized that I *had* changed. At that point I experienced *rapture*, a feeling that went through my entire

body (as opposed to goose bumps which were only on the surface). Of course I wasn't done changing, but I had begun living my one sixth-billionth of a future world peace. If I could continue the process of building personal capacity so as to make lifestyle changes and support and teach others to do the same things, then the world would reach peace. The rapture was like experiencing a *future* world peace in my being *right now*.

Neither the goose bumps nor the rapture was the transformation. The transformation was (*and is*) the gradual change of lifestyle.

Combining this upgrade with other ones

Regular capacity-building gives you the time, energy and skill to form friendships which support and help others. The decision of progressive, preferential helping causes you to focus on the best people to help. Now that you are aware of some of the tools of transformation, you may extend friendship to people who are generous, kind or progressive. The Make a Friend – Be a Friend – Lift a Friend Higher Method is fleshed out when you decide to Lift Your Friend Higher by inviting them to experience a transformation that you've already experienced.

Summary

Of the four kinds of change described in the Continuum of Personal Change, self-transformation is the most powerful and most profound. While transformation is essential to the evolution of the human race, it's hardly under human control. Nevertheless, you can make transformation more probable by putting yourself and others in contact with one or more of the positive sources of transformation mentioned in this article.

Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people. Such increased sensitivity makes it more difficult to marginalize people different from ourselves by thinking, 'They do not feel it as we would,' or 'There must always be suffering, so why not let them suffer?' – Richard Rorty *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*

Prayers, fasts and alms will be brought forward on Resurrection Day and placed in the balance, but when love is brought it will not fit in the scale. So the principle thing is love. Now, when you see love in yourself, make it increase and grow more. When you see in yourself “capital,” which is the urge to seek, increase it by seeking, as is said, “Blessing is in work.” If you don’t increase your capital, you will lose it.

You are no less than the earth which is altered by working it and turning it over with a spade so that it will yield crops, but if left alone it will turn hard. So when you see the urge to seek within yourself, get busy and don’t ask what the use of this coming and going is.

– Rumi *In It What Is In It*

What the hands do, the heart will learn. – Gandhi