

20. CREATIVE TRANSFORMATION



Focus: The essence of human nature is to take part in the dynamic and imaginative process of creation; transforming us, our relationships, our institutions, and our world.

R.I.P. JESUS

“No problem can be solved by the same consciousness that caused it.”
– Albert Einstein

Creativity and innovation are valued and sought after qualities in virtually every human endeavor – except religion. In many faith traditions, it is tradition itself that is worshipped, held up as the whole purpose of the religious enterprise. Be it infatuation with “smells and bells” or resistance to the use of inclusive language, many faithful people have confused defense of their understanding of right practice and right thinking with what they call “faith.” They insulate themselves from the unpredictable, demanding, transforming nature of the Spirit with a fierce, pious, unbending commitment to the Church. They practice what Fr. Richard Rohr has called a “cosmetic piety” intended to look good on the surface, but lacking any real depth or complexity. Defense of the changeless nature of their revealed “truth” becomes a virtue to be aspired to, regardless of how lifeless and rote the practice itself becomes.

“We’d rather have a controlled dead God than a lively chaotic God – we have a funeral for Jesus every Sunday.”

– Yvette Flunder
“OutFront Arizona: Blessing All Our Families” Conference, Phoenix, 2007

To say that the purpose of many churches is the maintenance of the institution is perhaps too noble a sentiment. Many churches have more in common with hospice units, clergy more in common with chaplains, than outposts and practitioners of the Kingdom of God. It’s not just comforting the human patients as they all slowly die off. It is clinging to the threadbare and dying theologies of the past that is at issue. The message itself is on life-support. Some are convinced that if we only preached the “true Gospel” with more vigor, there would be a great revival. Others have warped the message into an individualistic prosperity-oriented, victory-focused, self-help Kool-Aid. Many have found success by dressing up the message with catchy music, engaging videos, and light-hearted messages. But what needs creativity – what needs to be transformed – is not just the medium, but also the core message.

A rapidly growing segment of the population is not involved in organized religion of any sort – and they are *not* just waiting to be invited to attend. According to

Christian pollster George Barna, they are “passionately disinterested” in the church. Add to that the growing media presence of vocal and articulate atheists, and the prospects for Christianity as we know it are looking grim. People are simply no longer moved by the notion that they are horrible sinners from birth, redeemed only by the sacrifice of an impossibly perfect man at the hands of a bloodthirsty, tribal God. People no longer see the church as the sole keeper of what has been called “salvation.” Seekers of spiritual integrity and members of what Jack Spong calls the “Church Alumni/ae Association” are finding their own creative ways to fulfill the deepest longings of their souls – free from the perceived (and often very real) hypocrisy of the Church.

DATING THE DATING SERVICE

“The great tragedy of our age is the fact that (if one dares to say it) there are so many godless Christians. Christians, that is, whose religion is a matter of pure conformity and expediency. Their “faith” is little more than a permanent evasion of reality; a compromise with their deepest life in order to avoid admitting the uncomfortable truth that they no longer have any real need for God or any real vital love for God. They conform to the outward conduct of others just like themselves, and they call this the Church. And these “believers” cling together offering one another an apparent justification for their lives that are essentially the same as their materialistic neighbors whose horizons are purely those of the world and its transient values.”

–Trappist Monk Thomas Merton, *The Living Bread* (1956)

For many in our fast-paced, uncertain world, experiencing a sense of belonging and acceptance is the primary benefit of a faith community. Meaning, too, is often a motivating factor – as is forgiveness, healing, or the arrival of young adults’ first children. In this era of “church shopping,” many a church is rejected before the browsing spiritual consumers discover one that supports their beliefs and perpetuates their preferences and prejudices most closely.

For the majority of Western Christians, a close second to the priority of acceptance is that of community. As social beings, people long for community and fellowship along life’s journey. More often than not, as Merton asserts, community is used by many as insulation from the real world or any potential encounters with the Divine in favor of the ease of conformation and the justification of one’s comfortable lifestyle.

“Belonging systems do not necessarily lead to transformation and in fact, they often become an inoculation against transformation – or a total substitute for it. Just the fact that I am accepted or “belong” according to the church rules, I can assume that I know God or have met God. I think we’ve confused the dating service with the date.”

– Richard Rohr lecture,
Authentic Religion: Membership or Transformation? Anaheim, 2001

In the short-term, simply “belonging” often fulfills the need for which people are yearning. Otherwise thoughtful people tolerate remarkably bad theology and shallow spirituality because the belonging system itself is perceived as having more value than what the belonging system stands for or practices. People keep paying their dues to the dating service that not only doesn’t connect them with their true love, but actively works against revealing just how much love and grace is available to them. Women serve faithfully in churches that deny their authority to be in leadership. Parents of Gays and Lesbians silently tolerate hate speech from the pulpit that condemns their children. Progressively minded individuals endure clichéd prayers and liturgies that shore up spiritual ideas they have long-since abandoned. While the criteria for choosing a faith community rarely include “a catalyst for personal and societal transformation,” such criteria are precisely what are needed. Individuals, faith communities, relationships, dogmas, doctrines, conventional wisdom – the world itself – are all in need of transformation.

METAMORPHOSIS

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

– Paul, *Romans 12:2*

When Paul appeals to Christians in Rome to resist conformation with the world, he challenges them to first renew their minds. In so doing they will be so changed that they will be virtually unrecognizable. Paul uses the Greek word from which we also get the word “metamorphosis,” a term more likely found in science books referring to caterpillars and butterflies, tadpoles and frogs. Yet for many in our culture, the idea of transformation has been wed to simplistic ideas of being “born again” or being “saved.”

The Greek text of John 3 has Jesus say that you have to be born “from above” (*anōthen* in Greek), implying a journey, a process, or a Way of life. When Jesus informs Nicodemus of this requirement, the literalist Nicodemus balks and asks, “How can anyone be born after having grown old?” In order to have Nicodemus’ response make sense to readers, well-intentioned translators changed the Greek word attributed to Jesus that means “from above” into the English word “again.” In so doing, the idea of being “born again” entered the Christian lexicon, suggesting that what Jesus was looking for was a one-time event rather than a life-long relationship with the Spirit of Life. As important a concept as “born again” has become, it not only isn’t in the text, it likely misrepresents the original intention of the storyteller.

Likewise, the requirement of being “saved,” as it has come to be understood, is, at best, dubious. In light of studies of the origins of Christianity, theologians are rethinking the narrowness of the “savior” language popular among Christians

today. The Greek word from which “save” comes is also the root of words meaning to heal, preserve, do well, or be made whole. According to gospels that have been discovered in only the last century, a number of early Christian communities thrived without “savior” language at all. The communities associated with the Gospel of Thomas and “Q” (from which Matthew and Luke get many of their stories) don’t even have crucifixion and resurrection stories. The doctrinal “savior” language was really only brought to flower in the fourth century creeds.

Both being “born again” and being “saved” suggest static achievements. But the first disciples were called the people on “the Way,” suggesting just the opposite: transformation, transition, and change – a dynamic way of life. By understanding the broader definitions of what these concepts can mean, we open ourselves to deeper understandings of life and the possibility of metamorphosis.

“Yesterday’s faith and discipleship seem to have become threadbare and impotent. There is an urgent need for a fresh infusion of faith, new visions of redemptive grace, and conceptions of discipleship equal to the deep needs confronting us.”

– Lloyd M. Conyers, *The Relevance of Revelation*

RE-EXPERIENCING REALITY

Transformative spirituality is about the positive transformation of our lives, our relationships, and our way of being in the world. With life always moving and recreating itself around us, our need to handle change is unavoidable. Despite our efforts to limit unpleasant upheavals, the normalcy of life prevails. When people are wrenched out of the relationships or situations with which they’ve grown comfortable, people often wonder if they will be up to the task of putting their world back together again. Robert McAfee Brown calls these times moments of “creative dislocation.” He writes how, in retrospect, the times with the most significant growth in his life were times of great upheaval, or creative dislocation. The very brokenness can transform us to be more than we ever thought we could be.

“Transformative spirituality, authentic spirituality, is revolutionary. It does not legitimate the world, it breaks the world; it does not console the world, it shatters it. And it does not render the self content, it renders it undone.”

– Ken Wilbur, *One Taste* pg. 28

For most people, it’s only when they’ve been “undone” that there is an opportunity for the mystery of grace to work its magic. Jesus was gifted at “undoing” people in order to transform their lives and their thinking. His use of parables leveraged his own experience of the presence of the Divine in such a way that it caused the hearers to creatively experience a new reality. Bernard Brandon Scott has said, “A parable is meant to allow you to imaginatively re-experience reality.” The story transports the hearer to a place of exposure to a previously unimagined alternative view of life.

Jesus' creative use of parables to bring people to moments of disequilibrium is not a unique teaching method. Be it Nathan exposing King David's murder of Uriah in 2 Samuel or the Kōans of Zen Masters, story has been employed from time immemorial to transform people's self-perception, thoughts, and actions.

Music, dance, poetry, and the visual arts are likewise creative channels of transformation. Hildegard of Bingen declared that "Wisdom is found in all creative works" – and she hadn't even heard Mahler's 2nd *Symphony* or John Coltrane playing *Naima!* Today, film has become perhaps the most profound medium ever available to storytellers. As modern-day parables, movies help us delve deep into the most stirring, disturbing, and inspiring aspects of life.

"Movies and television shows are our modern myths; through them we work out who we are and negotiate the problems of modern life."

– Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hollywood Dreams & Biblical Stories*

Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat speak of "Befriending" films and suggest the viewing of movies as part of one's spiritual practice. The moment when the lights go down can be a "sacred interlude" of preparation. Being fully attentive to what is on the screen can offer an experience of "mindfulness." Along with a number of other practical suggestions, the Brussats urge moviegoers to:

"Explore the mythical overtones of drama that transcend the confines of our personal worlds and introduce us to the universality of human experience. Think of the film as a passport that gives you access to other cultures. Celebrate stories that take you to new places and break down the walls that all too often separate us from other peoples."

– Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat
www.spiritualityandpractice.com/films

CHANGED AND TRANSFORMED

"... the Christian life is not primarily about believing the right things or even being good. The Christian life is about being in relationship with God which transforms us into more and more compassionate beings, 'into the likeness of Christ.'"

– Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*

As people expend their energies arguing over the vicissitudes of "conservative" or "liberal" principles, the spirituality many are seeking is not to the left or to the right, but deeper. Christianity is not about things we should or shouldn't do and about just being nice. It is about reveling in the beauty of creation – about taking part in the wonderment of it all by living, loving, and "being" fully. It's about embracing the pain and suffering of the world and transforming it into new life. It's about harnessing the creative Spirit that is so much a part of defining what it means to be human – and using that creativity to "preserve things in the good." (Aquinas) The path toward transformation is different for every traveler, but the

need for transformation is an integral part of the human experience. In the words of that great theologian, Bob Dylan, "If you're not busy being born, you're busy dying."

As we pursue the growth we're called to seek in order to reach our full potential, it may be helpful to remember what Taoism teaches its adherents: so long as bamboo is alive and growing it is pliable and flexible. Once it dies, however, it becomes brittle and is easily snapped. Creativity and transformation are principles that stave off our tendency to become hard and brittle, and open us instead to the transformative power of God's unconditional love and grace.

*"O God, make me discontented with things the way they are in the world,
and in my own life.*

Make me notice the stains when people get spilled on.

*Make me care about the slum child downtown, the misfit at work,
the people crammed into the mental hospital,
the men, women and youth behind bars.*

*Jar my complacency, expose my excuses,
get me involved in the life of my city and world.*

Give me integrity once more, O God,

*as we seek to be changed and transformed,
with a new understanding and awareness of our common humanity."*

– Robert Raines, *Creative Brooding*

DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(Note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)

DVD Chapter 2:

Name some of the ways creative works and creativity itself are tied to Wisdom.

How does our identity as "creative bipeds" lead to our propensity for evil?

DVD Chapter 3:

McKenna describes how storytelling is not for the conveying of information, for confirmation of what you know, or comfort in what you believe, but for “unlearning” and transformation. Explain.

According to Brueggemann, why is “You don’t get it, do you?” one of the saddest lines of scripture?

Why is determining what is “so important that we are willing to give up everything” so critical for understanding the message of Jesus?

DVD Chapter 4:

For John Bell, there are “no reserved areas” in his following Jesus. Explain.

Why are the true marks of discipleship best understood as being whole, real, loving, and inclusive?

According to Carcaño, what are some of the goals to be achieved in transforming the world?

SPIRITPRACTICE:

“Art as Meditation” with potter Roger Strom

Questions for Personal Reflection:

What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material so far?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

Consider the following questions as a group:

What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

Be sure to follow up on this session’s theme with Session 20’s *Living it Out: “Emerging”* distributed by your facilitator.