

Transfiguration and Transformation

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Personal transformation is the theme found in much popular literature on self-help and spirituality. Upon entering the term, “personal transformation,” on an Internet search engine, over six million results are provided. Scanning the first few dozen reveals words like inner peace, spiritual growth, and enlightenment repeated frequently. An Internet search provides steps to achieve personal transformation as well as courses to take and principles to follow.

Despite the wealth of information on the Internet about how to achieve personal transformation, personal transformation can't be achieved in the same way one aims to fulfill a goal. Nor can one person coach another into authentic personal transformation. There is no time line that can be followed nor are there objective criteria which can be met to mark progress in achieving personal transformation. There's no one-size-fits-all transformative process.

The evidence of the Gospels suggests that personal transformation occurs over time, based on a way of living. While there are particular moments that may highlight the experience of transformation, it is not an experience which can be artificially created or willed.

In the middle of each of the synoptic gospels, the story of Jesus' own personal transformation is found: the transfiguration. While the story is about a unique experience, the moment of transfiguration makes sense only within the context of the life of Jesus over many years.

After months of traveling with the disciples to the various towns in Galilee, teaching and caring for others, Jesus invited his closest companions, Peter, James, and John, to go with him up a mountain to be

alone and away from the crowds. The trip wasn't meant to be a recreational hike in the mountains with a goal to scale a tall

peak. The time aside was meant to be a retreat. The mountain was the place to go in order to encounter the Divine Presence. It was with his intimate friends that Jesus went to have a time in seclusion.

While on the mountain, a transformational experience occurred. Everything that Jesus was born to be came together in that moment. The experience was so transforming that he radiated like the sun. The experience itself was rooted in Jewish faith traditions, symbolized by Moses and Elijah. Remember that Moses forged the covenant relationship between the Holy One and the people of Israel on a mountain top, and that Elijah, the greatest of the prophets, learned to listen to the Holy One as a still, small inner voice on another mountain top. Jesus' close friends wanted to stay in the moment and savor the experience as long as they were able, even though they were overwhelmed by the experience itself.

No one is meant to stay in this spiritual high. It is a peak experience that stands out of the rest of life but it is not how daily life is lived. Yet, because of the transformative experience, life is no longer the same as it was before. In this experience, Jesus was affirmed as teacher and taught others by his example of compassionate living. But the ministry of the Christ as teacher was built on the intentional way of life Jesus had embodied over the years that preceded the mountain top experience. The transfiguration affirmed the transformation which had already been occurring.

This transformational experience of Jesus, the event we refer to as the transfiguration, is a manifestation of Jesus as the person he was meant to be. The fullness of Jesus as the Christ was revealed in a unique and significant way on the mountain. It wasn't that Jesus suddenly changed because of the experience on the mountain. It was a transformation that he grew into over time. At age twelve, after Jesus spent time in the temple sharing in a learned discourse with the elders of Judaism, he returned home with Mary and Joseph. The writer of Luke's gospel conveys in chapter 2, verse 40, that "he grew in wisdom, age, and grace." That growth comes to fruition over time in the transfiguration. It is a transformation which will lead him to pass through death to new life in Jerusalem.

What does it mean for us, as individual people, to experience personal transformation? How do we manifest all that we were born to be?

As followers of Jesus, we learn to live the spiritual life by following the way Jesus lived. Jesus embraced and lived his religious and spiritual tradition. His observance of Judaism was not a legalistic pursuit. His observance was one of substance, which used and engaged the traditions and practices of the Jewish tradition in a heart-felt way. Jesus prayed the psalms, studied the Scriptures, and shared in the observances and practices both in synagogues and at the temple in Jerusalem.

His spiritual practice was not an isolated aspect of his life that he kept in private. Instead, it was shared with an intentional community whose purpose was to faithfully live lives that were spiritually rooted. He talked about his inner experience, shared it with others, all while teaching and encouraging others to use the wealth of the Jewish tradition as a source for their own spiritual lives.

It was from within this intentional community that, over time, Jesus grew to a particular friendship with Peter, James, and John. The four of them went together to retreat on the mountain, the holy place. It was with

his friends that the actual experience occurred. The transformation Jesus experienced wasn't just his experience but was something also experienced by those close to him.

It's significant to consider that personal transformation isn't just for an individual but it is significant for the community. Today, spirituality and personal transformation are often understood in much the same way as personal development: something one does by oneself for oneself. This is an important and unique aspect of Christian spirituality: *our* transformation into the fullness of who we were created to be isn't just for ourselves but it is for others.

The transfiguration of Jesus was clearly a peak experience in the process of transformation in the journey of Jesus from the simple life in Nazareth to the wondrous life of the resurrection. But the process itself was grounded in the day-to-day process of the spiritual journey. It was on the foundation of daily prayer, the intentional sharing faith with others, and conscious attempts to live in accordance with the growing spiritual awareness that transformation occurred. Ultimately, the transformation wasn't for Jesus alone but for the healing and the salvation of the world.

In a similar way, our transformation to becoming the image of God we were born to be takes place over time. The process will be marked by a regular pattern of prayer, sharing our faith with others in an intentional way, and striving to live in a way that is based on a growing spiritual awareness. In that process, there will be peak experiences. But overall, the transformation occurs day by day. It will not be just for us as individuals but will be for the healing and salvation of the world. ✠

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