

Choosing Transformation

By The Rev. Hollis Walker

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At the beginning of the service, Mya read one of my favorite prose-poems called the “Apes of Dawn,” Normandi Ellis’s poetic translation from the Egyptian book of the dead. [In case you missed hearing that beautiful piece, in short, a human narrator tells how, despite the derision of his neighbors, each morning he joins the apes on the banks of the river, howling an early-morning chorus upon the rising of the sun.

For the early Egyptians, the sun *was* god; after all, didn’t their very existence depend upon it? And yet the sun god died each night, sinking into the earth’s edge, and had to be coaxed into returning the next morning, on the other side of the great Nile River, through prayers, offerings and supplications. This is perhaps a seminal allegory of transformation—the disappearing into darkness, the not-knowing, the re-appearance—the sun looks just the same as it did last night, but lo! It has moved to the opposite edge of the earth, to the other side of the river. *Que milagro!* What a miracle! And our dear narrator, the one the lazy neighbors call “that old fool with the apes,” recognizes that miracle, as do his primate pals. Yes, he’s acting pretty silly, hanging out with the apes, all together raising their palms to the sun and howling in gratitude to that resurrected god. But our “old fool” knows something his fellow humans do not; he has, in him knowingness, become himSelf, his Self with a capital “S,” as the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung would call his *truest* self. The Self his god meant him to be. Our “old fool with the apes” is indeed the *wise* fool.

So—how do we become the wise fool of our own lives? What *is* transformation, really, and how do we do it, how do we get there? Is there even a “there” at which we will eventually arrive? We’re all familiar with the great mythological and religious stories of transformation: Jacob wrestles with the angel; Jesus’ prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane; the Buddha’s abandonment of his throne, his wife and child to seek enlightenment. While we are awed by those experiences, most of *our* lives don’t offer up such dramatic options. What does transformation look like here, on the ground, in our times?

Let me tell you about a woman I know. I’ll call her Grace. Grace had a pretty ordinary life in most ways. Married, three kids, decent education, worked at a variety of jobs. Hit 40 and a brick wall. She realized she had never accomplished her dreams—never even really tried—never done what she felt in her soul she was meant to do, and that time might be running out. So Grace did what no one thought made sense. She quit her full-time, regular sort of job and started getting up at 3 a.m. to throw two newspaper routes. When she was done—about 7:30 a.m.—she ate, had a shower, and went to work on her real job, the job she felt destined to do: being an artist. Grace went to the community college and took classes to learn the skills she needed. She read and studied and practiced techniques. She listened to other artists. Most importantly, she made art. I’m sure she made a lot of bad art in the beginning. But slowly and surely she became the artist she felt she was meant to be. That was 20 years ago. Today she is a well-known artist who has had a notable career; her public sculptures are on display in the United States and abroad. She has traveled extensively overseas. Major collectors and museums have purchased her art. She is not rich, and her life has not been without its sorrows. She has sacrificed a great deal to fulfill her destiny. But she is happy and does not regret the choices she made. Grace transformed her life.

Transformation usually begins with change, either imposed by circumstances beyond our control or changes we have purposely made in our own lives. Grace chose her change, but often the impetus to transform comes from external circumstances—say, you get fired from your job or your spouse leaves you or your house burns down. Or, on the positive side, you get promoted to a new job, your first child

comes along or a grandchild is born, you win the lottery. And yet. . .we can *weather* change, we can *cope* with change, without embracing transformation. We all know someone who has gotten a divorce and within a few months is married again, usually to a person who is startlingly like the last spouse. Change has occurred, but transformation likely has not. And often we can predict that the new relationship is going to end up down the tubes, perhaps for the very same reasons the previous one did. Likewise in 12-step programs we talk of “pulling a geographic.” This is when the addicted person decides a move to another locale is in order. “That’ll fix my problem; I can start all over in Maui!” The move offers some distraction, and indeed things may seem better for a while, but eventually, the untransformed person will return to his or her self-destructive ways. Sometimes we actively refuse the call to transformation. I have a friend who is a medical technologist who has been fired from her last four jobs. She hates being a medical technologist, but so far has not found the courage to pursue a new path; she has failed to transform. To paraphrase William Bridges, without transformation, change is just rearranging the furniture of our lives.

Transformation requires a conscious choice to embrace our own psychological and spiritual development. Some people have numinous experiences that call them into the process of transformation, such as a near-death event, visitations by spirits of the dead, powerful dreams or shamanic journeys in which a spirit guide offers instruction. Many evangelical Christians have a powerful personal experience of being “born again.” What all these demonstrate is that the process of transformation is, at its essence, a process of death and rebirth. Those of us who do not have those numinous experiences can be envious of them, but even people who get such a spiritual kick-start still must agree to *follow* the instructions they got, to answer the call.

We must make a full-on, no-holds-barred, willingness-to-do-whatever-it-takes commitment for real transformation to occur. Usually, “what it takes” comes to us in the form of grief work. Because every change, whether elected by us or externally imposed, embodies loss. We often think of loss only in terms of sad events: the death of a beloved person or pet, a business failure, the loss of health and vitality due to a medical crisis or chronic illness. But even the *happiest* events involve loss. When you marry, you leave behind your single life. When you get a new job, you depart a familiar setting, the people you knew there, the comfort of work you were confident you could do. When you have a baby, you surrender a good night’s sleep, spontaneous outings to dinner or a movie, a clean house.

All transformation involves an ending, loss and grief. It requires a descent into darkness, a disappearing, a sinking into the horizon, a metaphoric death. The Buddhist teacher John Tarrant tells us that, “Spiritual work brings us down to the foundations of life before it lets us rise.” This descent can affect us in different ways. The death of someone we love can create a painful and lengthy period of suffering from which we cannot imagine emerging whole. Other descents may seem more like being stuck in Limbo—nothing is happening, and nothing will ever change. Feelings of disorientation, chaos and confusion may be more powerful than those of grief, sadness or loss. In any case, Tarrant tells us, “When we are in the dark, any act of will or effort is beyond us.” Often these are times when we may indulge our addictions and self-loathing.

There is only one solution. We must be still in the darkness, come to love and accept it, before the light can return. This is akin to the winter, when the branches are bare and the sky is grey and nothing appears to be growing—and yet, underneath the ground, inside the dead tree, tiny microorganisms are feeding, plant cells are reproducing; and in caves, pregnant bears are sleeping. All wait in the dark for the spring, the return of the light, the birth of the new. So must we wait.

It would be nice if we could all stop working, quit taking care of our parents or our children, or meeting any of our other necessary obligations, in order to attend, full-time, to our own personal transformation. If you can do that, hallelujah. If you can’t, get a shoehorn. Make a little space here and there in your life. Quit the things you can quit—you can come back to them later. Surrender to the process. Spend time alone, no matter what it takes. See only people you really want to see. Do only things

you really want to do. Read books on topics about what's happening in your life. Watch uplifting, thoughtful movies. Reject violence, news of violence, anything loud or invasive or demanding. Keep a journal. Write your memoir. Write your obituary as if you died today, and ask yourself how you feel about what you have or haven't yet accomplished. Find solace in nature, even if only in a simple walk. Eat good, healthy, comforting food. Listen to music. Look at art.

Whatever your personal circumstance, take your passage seriously: imagine that this is your last chance to embrace your life's purpose, as indeed it may be. Look for meaning in what has happened to you. Think of your life as a movie, or a play, or a good book, and look at the plot, subplots and characters. Are there evident patterns? Be curious. Find some help doing this. A spiritual director or therapist or grief counselor may be a good choice. A 12-step or other kind of support group might address your particular struggles. If you are religious, plumb your faith tradition, or if it's not working, try on a new one. "Do what you feel called to do," advises M. Scott Peck, "but also be prepared to accept that you don't necessarily know what you're going to learn. Be willing to be surprised by forces beyond your control, and realize that a major learning on the journey is the art of surrender."

Be careful not to abort this process. Don't push things forward, and don't imagine you can go back to your "old" self. We cannot force the shoot to come forth from the bulb in the ground, nor can we push it back in without killing it; we must wait, knowing it will come in its time. And, slowly, the shoots do begin to come forth, some tentatively, others so quickly that we swear we can see them move. These are the inklings of what we are becoming, what the new landscape of our lives is going to look like. These may come as small ideas, or big ones. You may wake up one morning thinking, "I want to plant a garden," even though you've never grown so much as a single carrot, or, "I will no longer allow my spouse to verbally abuse me, even if it means I have to leave." You may go to bed in tears, realizing you have had to let go of your lifelong dream of being a famous actor, or a great tennis player, or becoming really fluent in Spanish. You may find yourself—even if you are an atheist—praying for guidance. Perhaps you have a career you love, a family you adore, everything on the surface seems just fine—and yet you feel called to the other shore. Sometimes we find ourselves doing or being the exact opposite of what we've believed in all our lives, taking a walk on the wild side, so to speak. You've always thought of yourself as having two left feet, and inexplicably seem to have signed up for a ballroom dancing class? As one of my mentors told me, "Your yearnings are your friends." Listen to the little whispers in your head. "The way of the Creative works through change and transformation," according to Alexander Pope, "so that each thing receives its true nature and destiny and comes into permanent accord with the Great Harmony: this is what furthers and what perseveres."

Some Cliffs Notes:

Transformation is not a linear process. It cannot be predicted, or tracked, or explained, and it does not have an endpoint. There is no destination, only a "coming into permanent accord with the Great Harmony." Transformation becomes a way of life, as if we were ascending a never-ending spiral staircase. The good news? Occasionally we reach a landing, where we catch our breath before taking on the next flight.

Transformation is also, on the surface at least, a completely selfish process. People around you may not understand what you are doing, and may try to dissuade you. Listen to your own inner voices; talk to an objective listener, the counselor you found earlier, if you need a second opinion before taking a leap. But do not be pushed off your path. In truth, by choosing transformation, you are empowering yourself to make the greatest contributions you can to life. "Personal transformation can and does have global effect," says Marianne Williamson. "As we go, so goes the world, for the world is us. The revolution that will save the world is ultimately a personal one."

Transformation is available to, and can present itself as a possibility to anyone, regardless of age or even maturity. Also, those who have undergone dramatic transformations in their past are not necessarily “done.” We have all known someone whose life underwent a huge change, and who embraced a spiritual practice or new lifestyle in a marvelous transformational process, and then, at some point down the road, fell stagnant, grew stale, or seemed, as Yeats put it, “fastened to a dying animal.” Transformation beckons that person, too. And be forewarned that there are no rules for transformation. No one can tell you the right way to do it. Even that old archconservative St. Paul recognized this. He told the Romans (12:2), “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may determine what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Paul didn’t say God’s going to appear at your elbow and whisper the instructions in your ear. He said “by *testing*” each individual can find his or her own right path, what is “good and acceptable and perfect.”

I’ve been talking about transformation objectively; now I want to do what I never could have done as my old self. I want to tell you a piece of my own story of transformation. Between 2005 and 2010, my father and eight other people I cared about deeply died. In 2008, I moved from my beloved Santa Fe to Berkeley with my partner. That year I met and began caring for an elderly neighbor, knowing intuitively she would die on my watch, which she did, about a year later. My gift to Beth was companionship, practical help, and unconditional love. Her gift to me was transformation. Even before she died, I—who had not attended a church in 30 years—felt led to begin studies in an interfaith seminary program, and to pursue training as a clinical chaplain and spiritual director. The next few years comprised a deep and sometimes painful learning process that demanded everything I had. I had already left behind my previous career as a journalist. Seminary and my other training required that I spend every cent I had saved. I had to end my longtime relationship because I felt it was broken and couldn’t be fixed; it was selfish, gut-wrenching and nevertheless the right thing to do for me. Though I felt a clear and strong call to a new life, I grieved all of those losses terribly, and I often doubted my choices. Ultimately I was led to return to Santa Fe, and by last fall I felt I had started to find my way out of the darkness: I had a part-time job as a hospice chaplain, I lived in a lovely little guesthouse a friend had graciously loaned me, I was reconnecting with people who were truly important in my life. Then, within about two weeks’ time, everything seemed to fall apart again. My friend told me that unfortunately she needed her guesthouse back. And I awoke one morning with a voice in my head that said, “You have a lump in your left breast.” I knew it was cancer, and I didn’t have health insurance. I felt in my bones that the challenge ahead would take all my strength, so I quit my job, though that decision defied reason. The wheel of fortune was once again turning for me. Yet having been through the tremendous transformation during the previous years, I felt a little better prepared. Now I *know* I don’t know where I’m going, or how I’m going to get there. Luckily, a dear friend took me into her home, and I pay only a small amount of rent. Somehow every month I have been able to pay my bills, and I have gotten the health care I needed. I had surgery and my prognosis is very good. In fact, everything in my life feels “in accord with the Great Harmony.” I sense that I have come to a landing, and I am taking a breath before the next ascent. Yet my cancer treatment is not yet over, and I do not yet have a reliable income. I still have days—and nights—that are filled with uncertainty and grief. I do not know what the future holds.

But there is at least one scene in the movie of my life that I can clearly visualize. In this scene, I sit on my haunches in the dark on the east bank of the Nile, with my friends, the apes, and one strange old man. Holding our breath, we hope and wait. Finally, the great blazing disk cracks open the darkness. Together we raise our palms and howl joyfully as the sun god rises in the east. Won’t you join us?

Suggested Reading (these are a few key books that have been helpful to me personally and in working with clinical patients and spiritual direction clients, presented in no particular order):

Awakening Osiris: The Egyptian Book of the Dead, Normandi Ellis. (includes “Apes of Dawn”)

Further Along the Road Less Traveled, M. Scott Peck, M.D.

Cancer as a Turning Point, Lawrence LeShan, Ph.D.

The Light Inside the Dark, John Tarrant

Falling Upward, Fr. Richard Rohr

Transitions: Making Sense of Life’s Changes, William Bridges

In Midlife: A Jungian Perspective, Murray Stein

How to Get From Where You Are to Where You Want to Be, Cheri Huber

Sacred Therapy: Jewish Spiritual Teachings on Emotional Healing and Inner Wholeness, Estelle Frankel

The Grief Club: The Secret to Getting Through All Kinds of Change, Melodie Beattie