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Transformation



We would think that the unexpected brings the most stress to our lives, but psychologists say that planned change is even more disruptive than unplanned change. Somehow, things that “just happen” are seen as acts of God. We can fight them, ignore them, or accept them, but we know we can’t fix them or change them. So, after the initial shock or disappointment, we find the energy to deal with them. We find the grace to rise to the occasion. But when we think there’s some malicious or lesser mind at work, or that we could have changed something by wile or guile, we fight it, fret over it, and never stop fussing, at least internally. That’s stress.




For the past fifty years, we’ve been experts at *planning* change. That is a new phenomenon for the most part. Unfortunately, it has now become a mindset and a way of life. We think we can do it and that we *ought* to be doing it. That’s not to say that some of the changes we’ve brought about, in church and society, weren’t good and necessary, but I think we have paid a large price internally for such a Promethean, daringly original self-image. For the most part, we can no longer just “let it be.” We are now natural fixers, changers, adjustors—constant engineers of our own reality. It makes for a very different kind of soul. It develops what I call the calculative mind, as opposed to the goal of all mature spirituality: the contemplative mind.




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The attitude that is needed for deep and panoramic seeing is not a fixing, calculating stance, but much more an attitude of listening, trusting, and waiting. It is the only way “to get out of the way” with our judgments, control mechanisms, and personal opinions. Maybe that’s why Jesus says we are saved by faith, by trusting and surrendering instead of pushing and trying, and by passion (the *suffering of reality*) rather than deliberate action. Interestingly, we say we are saved by the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus—all things that are done *to* him more than anything he does.



It seems that the human person needs an Absolute outside of itself. Have you noticed how much the enthusiastic types on television or radio use the word *absolutely*—even when they’re talking about an exercise machine?! In an age when we have no real absolutes, the whirling mind and emotions look for something upon which to settle in order to take away their anxiety. We seem to need an outer reference point to stop the vertigo of our own imagination and the tyranny of having to make constant choices. We seem to need some kind of god to serve as a centerpiece. “I will create an absolute for myself to justify and settle my choices: my football team, my marriage, my religion, my land, my theory, my self-image, my rights, my exercise machine—anything at all. Just give me something to wrap my thoughts and feelings around for a while, something outside of myself—an idea, an event, a person, a project—to free me from the boredom and tyranny of myself!” *It works* and gives us a settled sense of purpose and direction. Without it, we find it very hard to live with our own mind and emotions.





The Wisdom Pattern

The idea is not wrong, just misplaced. The only real issue is to find an absolute that really has *some* Absolute character to it. That is probably the difference between a wise person and a merely opinionated person. Wisdom knows what is worth worshiping and honoring; the rest of us will settle for anything to get us through the next conversation. I believe that everybody has faith in something in order to survive, even if it is faith in cynicism. We all find something upon which to lean, and false gods do work for short periods. We all find some absolute around which to whirl, even if it is an absolute opinion that there is no God.

I use the concepts of faith and the contemplative mind almost interchangeably. For me, they are the same reality, both describing the trustful and God-centered way that we can allow ourselves to be used. In this *different mind*, we do not so much try to change reality or others, as allow ourselves to be changed, so that we can be *useable for God*. It is not so important *what* we do now—as *the who that is doing it*. This is crucial and is at the heart of what we mean by that amorphous word *holiness*. There is a radically transformed experience of the *I* when we are “holy,” both within ourselves and noticed by those who observe us. The private “I” has been transformed into a Larger Self that believers would call God. “I live no longer not I . . .” (see Galatians 2:20).

The Belly of the Whale


The word *change* normally refers to new beginnings. But transformation, the mystery we’re examining, more often *happens not when something new begins, but when something old falls apart*. The pain of something old falling apart—chaos—invites the






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soul to listen at a deeper level. It invites, and sometimes forces, the soul to go to a new place because the old place is falling apart. Most of us would never go to new places in any other way. The mystics use many words to describe this chaos: fire, dark night, death, emptiness, abandonment, trial, the Evil One. Whatever it is, it does not feel good and it does not feel like God. We will do *anything* to keep the old thing from falling apart. This is when we need patience and guidance, and the *freedom to let go* instead of tightening our controls and certitudes. Perhaps Jesus is describing just this phenomenon when he says, “It is a narrow gate and a hard road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matthew 7:13–14). Not accidentally, he mentions this narrow road right after teaching the Golden Rule. He knows how much letting go it takes to “treat others as you would like them to treat you” (7:12).



So, a change can force a transformation. Spiritual transformation always includes a usually disconcerting reorientation. It can either help people to find a new meaning or it can force people to close down and slowly turn bitter. The difference is determined precisely by the quality of our inner life, our spirituality. Change happens, but transformation is always a process of letting go, living in the confusing, shadowy space for a while, and eventually being spit up on a new and unexpected shore. You can see why Jonah in the belly of the whale is such an important symbol for many Jews and Christians.

In moments of insecurity and crisis, shoulds and oughts don't really help; they just *increase* the shame, guilt, pressure, and likelihood of backsliding. It's the deep *yeses* that carry us through. It's that deeper something we are strongly *for* that





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allows us to wait it out. It's someone in whom we absolutely believe and to whom we commit. In plain language, love wins out over guilt any day. It is sad that we settle for the short-run effectiveness of shaming people instead of the long-term life benefits of true transformation. But then, we are a culture of product and efficiency, not terribly patient with growth. God clearly is much more patient—and, finally, much more effective. God lets Jonah run in the wrong direction, but finds a long, suffering, circuitous path to get him back where he needs to be—in spite of himself! That is patiently supporting inner transformation. Only God seems to have developed such a talent. We usually prefer order, control, predictability, and immediacy. I think that is probably the most striking difference between institutional religion and the God of mercy.



The Loss of Criteria



The previous personal, theistic worldview saw things in terms of what was often called the Great Chain of Being. The great monotheistic religions held God as a clear outer reference point that grounded and originated all things. All lower things were understood in terms of the higher, which gave them an essential importance in the universe. Everything belonged and mirrored the Highest. Within the Great Chain of Being (which I will explore in more detail in Chapter Eight), everything was *intrinsically* connected and had *inherent* dignity and meaning. The order was typically (1) the Divine Realm, (2) the realm of heaven and angels, (3) the human, (4) the animal, (5) the vegetable, (6) the waters and minerals in the earth, and (7) the earth itself, which held them all together.