

## Transformation: An Exploration and Invitation

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### A Selection from Contemporary Spiritual Literature From *Healing Into Life and Death* by Stephen Levine

**H**azel was a very difficult patient. The nurses called her “a real bitch on wheels.” Few wished to spend time with her. Hazel’s physicians and attendants said that whenever she rang the bell, they were greeted with nasty comments and considerable verbal abuse. And of course, every time she rang the bell it took a bit longer to be answered. All her life had been a struggle for control.... All that she didn’t want and could not have was pushed away from her heart, and all that she could get was grasped at feverishly. And so she found herself dying alone and in great pain. She had judged so often that even her adult children would not visit....

For six weeks her isolation and pain increased until one night something changed. She came to a point where she could no longer stand the discomfort in her back and legs, or the pain of her un-lived life. At four a.m., feeling like jumping out of her skin, she began to review her life amidst the pulsations of pain.... She had nowhere to turn and never had she felt so alone and helpless. Feeling death approach, she remembered herself as a youngster, open and hungry for the world. She saw how she had closed down over the years. With a deep sigh she let the helplessness wash over her and ... unable to fight for another moment, she surrendered and let go into the moment.

But then, letting go into the pain in her legs and back, she began to sense, quite beyond reason, that she was not alone in her suffering. She felt what she later called the “ten thousand in pain.” She began to experience all the other beings who at that very moment were lying in that same bed of agony—the brown-skinned woman slack with malnutrition, the Eskimo woman lying on her side dying during childbirth, the body of a woman in the twisted wreckage of a car ... image after image arose of the “ten thousand in pain.”

In the hour of her greatest agony, something in her connected with the enormity of suffering she was sharing at that moment.... As the days unfolded after this extraordinary experience, Hazel’s heart opened more and more to all the others in pain in the hospital. She constantly asked after them. As the weeks went by, she continued to get a deeper sense of what she had participated in. She went

beyond herself, and the room became a place where the nurses would come on their break because it was a room of love.

Soon Hazel’s children came to visit, responding to her plea for forgiveness because of the warmth and surrender of her phone calls. Her grandchildren sat on the edge of her bed, the grandchildren she had never met, the hearts she had rejected before they were born....

This is an example of someone who seemed to have healed in the most profound manner, even though she died a short time later. We witnessed a heart that opened incredibly, a deepening wisdom and a sense of participation in life that broadened with each day.... The condition of Hazel’s body didn’t change, but the condition of her heart certainly did as she learned to touch her pain with mercy instead of fear.

### Reflections

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**K**aren Gustafson’s absence today in order to be present for the birth of her grandson reminded me of our own son Kyle’s birth, 23 years ago last Tuesday. Like most expectant first-time fathers, I was relatively naïve, if not to say downright clueless, about the implications of having a baby. In fact, just a couple of months earlier I had stood up one Sunday and told the congregation that I felt well prepared for the challenges ahead. After all, a couple of years earlier, Trina and I had successfully raised a puppy to adult dog-hood. Could a human child be *that* much harder?

Well, you can guess how older and wiser listeners reacted that morning. There was much tittering, laughter, and rolling of eyes, and I knew at that moment that my projections were just a little too optimistic. And that did indeed prove to be the case. After Kyle entered our lives, nothing was the same, and only in hindsight was I able to make a necessary distinction. Having a pet requires certain *changes* in a person’s normal routines. But to bring a child into the world and raise him or her successfully is *transformative*. It literally requires us to be a different person—more attentive, focused, sacrificial, patient, flexible, collaborative, humble, intuitive, and dutiful than we were before. Pets can generally be incorporated into one’s lifestyle, but raising a child *is* a lifestyle.

I think a lot of people resist this notion. They want children, but they also are rather attached to the priorities and patterns of behavior they have already established. Parenting is seen as an enriching enterprise, but not necessarily one that requires major concessions or a more or less permanent alteration of our interests and expectations. But the plain fact is, having a child is perhaps the most disorienting experience any couple or single parent can have.

It has been said that the only real *constant* in life is change. As our bodies age, friends and family members come and go, the contours of the surrounding environment shift, and as new technologies find their way into our homes and workplaces, we find ourselves constantly scrambling to adjust. Human beings are exceptionally adaptable, which is one reason our species has become so pervasive and so powerful.

But change and adaptation are not at all the same as transformation. A person's appearance, opinions, social, and economic status can change repeatedly with little if any affect on their orientation toward life or core sense of selfhood. My colleague Earl Holt once observed that change is something that Unitarian Universalists in particular seem to relish. Most of us are so determined to get everything we can out of life, he writes, that we ought to adopt "salvation by hyperactivity" as our denominational motto.

Now transformation certainly involves change, but at a more fundamental, life-altering level than most of us might envision or be prepared for. It is not an additive process whereby we simply keep piling one experience, adventure, or discovery on top of another. Transformation brings us up short and redirects us. Christians would use the word "conversion," which literally means to "turn around" or "turn one's attention to" some new possibility or alternate reality of which we had previously been ignorant or unaware. The Greek word *metanoia* appears in several passages of the New Testament and "conversion" is its English equivalent.

The true convert, according to the 17th century Puritan minister Joseph Alleine, assumes a new persona, becomes quite literally a new creature. What had been a worm is now a butterfly with all the attributes that such a metamorphosis implies. For the convert, Alleine continues, "holiness is woven into all his or her powers, principles and practice." In other words, the change, though not necessarily dramatic, is deep and thorough.

But conversion or transformation isn't an experience that belongs exclusively to the religious sphere. According to James McClintock "conversion" is not too strong a term to use with respect to Aldo Leopold's memorable shift from an anthropocentric to a biocentric outlook.

Many of us are familiar with the story of Leopold's growing discomfort with existing policies of land and wildlife management in the first decades of the 20th century. As an employee of the U.S. Forest Service serving in the Southwest, one of his tasks was to track down and kill as many wolves as possible because, it was believed, the reduction or even elimination of wolves would mean more deer for avid hunters like himself.

But after many successful hunting expeditions, one day Leopold looked into a dying wolf mother's fierce green eyes and saw something he had never noticed before: a being who belonged in that mountainous New Mexico environment and contributed something important to

it. In fact, it suddenly occurred to him, she **realized then, Leopold later wrote, "that there was something new to me in the mother wolf's eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain."** "I realized then, Leopold later wrote, "that there was something new to me in the mother wolf's eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain."

Although Leopold did not coin the term "ecology," he quickly became one of America's most consistent and outspoken proponents of ecological stewardship and restoration. But for that to happen, he had to abandon conventional 19th century conservation theory and practice in favor of a controversial approach that as yet had very few subscribers.

A very similar series of events affected the life of Archie Belaney, better known to Canadians as Gray Owl. A noted hunter, trapper, and wilderness guide, he, too eventually recognized the harm that the indiscriminate hunting of beaver and other fur-bearing animals was causing. Instead of their enemy, Gray Owl eventually became the beaver's greatest advocate and one of Canada's earliest and most influential environmentalists.

In both of these instances, conversion or transformation was triggered by the insight that, as Martin Luther King once put it, we are all connect-

ed in an “inescapable web of mutuality.” Our own personal well-being, our own “salvation” if you will, requires that we recognize, honor, and nurture the relationships within that web. According to the Jungian psychotherapist Miriam Greenspan, “Awareness of this mutuality . . . impels us to search for ways to heal the whole, rather than encase ourselves in a bubble of denial and impossible individualism.”

So let’s ask this question: under what circumstances is transformation likely to occur? For both Aldo Leopold and Gray Owl the tragic consequences of their own heedless taking of life suddenly became apparent and that recognition profoundly affected their ambitions and fundamentally altered their sense of mission. Not infrequently pain, failure, a profound sense of loss, disappointment, or shame serve as triggers for serious reassessment of our life path. As the 12th century Persian poet and mystic Rumi observes, “A difficult life is better for someone who truly wants to learn. Comfortable lives always end in bitterness.”

A good example of someone for whom difficulty provided a hard but necessary lesson is Peter, Jesus’s impetuous and posturing disciple. What’s most interesting about Peter is that he never really experiences *metanoia* during the course of Jesus’s ministry. He listens to his rabbi’s parables, ethical teachings, and admonitions about the dangers and difficulties of discipleship but very little of it really sinks in. At times Jesus expresses open frustration with Peter’s inability to “see the light.”

Jesus recognizes that despite his efforts, Peter’s mindset hasn’t shifted, and he predicts that when the authorities close in, Peter will run away and repeatedly deny that he ever even knew his beloved teacher. And that, despite Peter’s protestations, is precisely what happens. It is only in the midst of his humiliation and despair that *metanoia* finally occurs, and Peter becomes a new man—confident, courageous, and utterly committed—the “rock” on which the Church would be built.

The key to conversion or transformation, Kathleen Norris says, is to “become disillusioned. . . . We need to lose our false selves,” as the Apostle Peter did.

Hazel, whose story I shared earlier in the service, found herself in different, but equally difficult straits—angry, isolated, out of control, and wracked with pain. After six weeks of isolation, Stephen Levine writes, Hazel “had nowhere to turn and never felt more alone or helpless.” Too weary to

fight the world any longer, she took a deep breathe and just let herself sink into that “inescapable web of mutuality,” which allowed her to become aware of not just her own, but the world’s suffering.

At that hour, her hard heart began to soften, and she was possessed by a previously unfamiliar and unexpected sensation: compassion. But that was only the beginning for, as Levine observes, “As the weeks went by Hazel continued to get a deeper sense of what she had participated in; her countenance became steadily softer, and her presence more welcoming.

It would be a mistake to presume that transformation always or even usually takes place suddenly and that the results are immediately obvious. Weeks, months, and even years can pass during which this turning slowly takes place, and one becomes significantly reoriented. The noted Buddhist writer Jack Kornfield tells of an acquaintance who had studied and taught meditation for many years only to concede that she didn’t think that she had changed very much as the result of her spiritual practice. But the fact is, long-time friends and associates noticed a big difference in her demeanor, and they told her so.

Indeed, Kathleen Norris argues that it is actually better if the process of “conversion” takes place gradually rather than as the result of an abrupt, startling wake-up call. The most effective and lasting transformations occur as one learns over time to be fully present with a “quiet heart that allows you to become a good listener, and patient observer of those “plants, animals, people, cloud formations” to whom we are connected in joy and woe.

One could easily get the impression from what has been said so far that transformation typically serves a positive purpose, but that is obviously not the case. People don’t always or even routinely respond to serious difficulties or crisis by embracing a new outlook and embarking on a more promising path. Cynicism, scapegoating, resentment, self-pity, and depression are also common and less healthy reactions to adversity.

We also need to consider the transformations that take place in conjunction with success, social, or economic advancement. We have all known individuals who were “spoiled” by their good fortune,

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their personalities warped by the newfound privileges they enjoy and the resources they command. It has been said that successful people stand in need of prayer more than those whom life has treated harshly, because the former run the greater risk of forfeiting their souls. Think, for instance, of Ebenezer Scrooge prior to his redemption on Christmas Eve.

Let's end, then, with this question: what role could a faith community play in this process? How might it prepare its members to participate in the positive, life-enhancing experience of transformation?

Many Americans still presume that religious communities are designed to address issues related to metaphysics: posing and answering questions about the ways of God, dispelling the mysteries of salvation, and encouraging faith in the miraculous. Although people do harbor concerns about such matters they are also grappling with more concrete and immediate life issues. Among the questions often asked are these:

- "Materially I am so blessed, but why am I not as happy or as grateful as I imagine I should be?"
- "I'm always busy and never seem to have enough time, but what am I really accomplishing? I wake up in the middle of the night feeling that much of what I do has little meaning in the larger scheme of things."
- "Society says it's OK for the individual to pursue his or her self-interest and that competition for life's goodies is a healthy thing. But I also hunger for the spirit of community. Are the two compatible?"
- "I don't feel I'm connecting with others at a deep and meaningful level. Where can I find a safe and accepting place to share my thoughts and concerns with serious-minded people?"

I am convinced that no small number of people in our increasingly dysfunction culture truly long to be "saved," although not necessarily in the meta-

physical sense. They have become frustrated with a life that feels shallower, more tedious, and less intrinsically meaningful than it should. They are troubled that so many faith communities fail to address their confusion and inner conflict and do not take seriously the foregoing questions. "People are leaving the traditional church because they want a *transforming* spirituality," Spencer Burke writes—one that produces a fresh perspective, a renewed sense of purpose, and the possibility of greater daily gladness.

Searchers are attracted to a place like First Unitarian Society for lots of reasons: we crave intellectual stimulation, desire a spiritual foundation for our children, are looking for friends or a life partner with compatible values, or we feel the need for a community that can serve as an emotional safety net. But none of these really captures the church's real reason for being, which is to serve up an alternative vision of the "good life" and invite dissatisfied souls to consider and to claim it.

Human civilization is at a critical crossroads. We are approaching the end of an exceptionally self-indulgent era, and a growing number of us realize that the existing cultural norms neither satisfy the individual nor will they sustain the planet. Faith communities have an important role to play in helping people shift their perspective and adjust their expectations. Perhaps the best contribution we can make is to give today's anxious spiritual seeker the fresh insights, solid support, and honest encouragement that will allow them, in Richard Holloway's words, "to change elegantly rather than awkwardly when the time is ripe."

#### **Closing Thought from John Morgan**

In the end, it won't matter how much we have,  
But how generously we have given.  
It won't matter how much we know,  
But rather how fruitfully we have lived.  
And it won't matter what we believed,  
But how deeply and genuinely we have loved.