

Experiencing Transformation

A Message by James R. Newby

Text: Acts 9:1-7

As most of you know by now, I love transformation stories. It has been said that, according to personality and experience, that ministers are led by Spirit to speak on 6 or so basic topics, around which they prepare their messages each week. I know that *Number One* for me is becoming a *Beloved Community*, but *Transformation* comes in a close second!

In my own life I have had transformational experiences, and I believe that central to being a Quaker is an understanding of what it means to be transformed. In short, Quakers are in the transformation business. As Friends, we believe that there is a way of life that is much better than the life for which most of us have settled. Most of us believe that Jesus gave us glimpses into this better life, and that he modeled for us a way of living that, if emulated, would transform the world. As we make our way through our daily

experiences, and as we help others through their experiences, recognizing that all of these experiences carry within them the possibility of being *awakening or teachable moments*, we become *conduits of transformation*. The best advice that I have ever been given concerning my own spiritual growth was to "Pay Attention" to each moment of life. I believe that God is continuously speaking to us, and if we are to grow spiritually, it is up to us to get the message.

You remember the transformative experience of our founder, George Fox, as he fell into despair following his years of seeking. He wrote in this way about this life-altering experience which occurred in 1647: "When all my hopes in them...that is in the priests of his day...and in all persons were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could I tell what to do, *then, oh then, I heard a voice which said, 'There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition, and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy...'*" For Fox,

this message was transformative, and was the birth moment of the People called Quakers.

In my own life I have experienced a few awakening moments, but one was especially transformative. It was an experience that occurred on a lonely stretch of beach on the North Carolina coast. I would suppose that it is because of this experience that I have always been drawn to that coast, and I hope to be there again at the end of September. I will not fully describe what happened, suffice to say that at one of the lowest points in my life, I heard a voice of comfort that assured me that everything was going to be alright. A complete description of this experience is in the introduction to my book, *Sacred Chaos*, which are still for sale in the Meetinghouse office!

Now, because of my own life experiences, I have been most interested in others who have gone through some of the same kinds of life changes. Thomas Merton, a Trappist Monk relates what he experienced on a crowded street in downtown Louisville, Kentucky.

Following this transformative experience, he wrote about his NEW sense of connection with his fellow human beings: "Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed..."

Reynolds Price was a writer from North Carolina who wrote a book titled, *A Whole New Life*. I have spoken about him before. In this book he tells about a healing vision that he had, that he believes saved his life. In an interview with the *Oxford Review*, he shared the result of such a life changing vision: "When you undergo huge traumas in life," he writes, "everybody is in league with us to deny that the old life has ended...Everybody is trying to patch us up and get us back to who *we were*, when in fact what we need to be told is, 'You're dead. Who are you going to be tomorrow?'"

You're dead. Who are you going to be tomorrow? It is the question that confronted Paul after his experience on the Road to Damascus, and the question that faced George Fox following his life-changing experience of 1647. And it was most certainly the question with which I was faced following my spiritual confrontation on that beach in North Carolina. *All who experience these transformative events are faced with the "Who are you going to be tomorrow?" question.*

All of these life-altering experiences have a way of bursting into our lives from the outside. From outside our socio-economic group, from outside our "in group," from outside our ingrown patterns and ways of doing. We experience God on a lonely Atlantic beach, through a vision, a voice, or a blinding light, or even on a street in Louisville, Kentucky, and *as a result of such experiences life is viewed from a completely different and transformative point of view.*

As I have sought to understand the process of transformation, it seems clear to me that it moves through different stages: *First* is the

uncomfortable recognition that our lives are out of sync with how God would have us live... or that we no longer feel comfortable in the patterns and ways of doing that we have become accustomed, and that those in our world of relationships have become accustomed. *Second*, through the experience of chaos we feel as a result of such discomfort, we are brought into the Light of recognizing the estrangement. *Third*, God moves us to an experience of transformation, where we begin to see life and our place in this life from a completely different perspective.

I love what Marcus Borg has to say about the purpose of spirituality. He writes that the purpose of spirituality is "to help birth the new self and nourish the new life." He calls spirituality "midwifery." He writes, "Spirituality is about becoming conscious of, and intentional about a deepening relationship with God...What spirituality is about is helping us become aware of a relationship that already exists...In short, spirituality is about the process of becoming born again, and again, and again."

Throughout all of history, the most famous of transformation stories is recorded in Chapter 9 of the Book of Acts. As we heard earlier, as Saul, who became Paul, "approached Damascus...a light from heaven flashed about him. And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? And he said, "Who are you, Lord? And he said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." *And Friends, the world has not been the same since.*

Each of us will experience God in different ways. Transforming moments come to our souls through various avenues. Few of us will have the kind of experience that Paul had. I am convinced, however, that by "paying attention" to our life experiences, and asking that familiar question, "How is God working here?" we can prepare for the possibility of new and transformative awakening moments. I believe that these moments give the journey of life meaning. These moments carry within them the possibility of issuing in *a whole new life*. They are experiences that will change not only our own lives, but the lives of all with whom we come in contact.

