

Persons Transform Persons

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Although I am formulating thoughts on "how information becomes transformation," I must finally disagree with that simple assumption. Yes, information can get our attention, and is usually a necessary first opening; however, we are seldom personally "transformed" by an idea or a new piece of knowledge, unless it is also connected to a person or a relationship. Persons finally transform persons into persons; ideas only rearrange our minds. This is why the monotheistic religions insist upon the Being of God being "Personal" and not just a force or an energy or a law. It is also why we deeply need one another to grow up. We are a shared life, and so much so, that there is no life at all if we are not in communion.

Pure Being (God) is not merely a mechanistic order, but Being is first of all-- and essentially -- life. Life is somehow personal, dynamic, relational, conscious, choice-full, and what we finally call merciful. Suddenly we are involved in give and take, sharing, desire, remorse, choice, and communion. Spirituality at its best is a personal love affair and not merely a morality, a doctrine, a method, a practice, or some purifying technique. This dynamic of personal love and shared life is at the heart of all mystical and mature spirituality. It is the essential link between information and transformation, and is always tied up with some experience of being loved and especially with being loved "for nothing."

God does not love us because we deserve it, it seems. God loves us because we need it. God keeps us tied to the Godself inherently and personally. Does that sound startling? It really shouldn't. If there is one prime idea in the Bible, it is that of God's undeserved and personal love for what God has created. And further, God does not love us because we are necessarily good. God loves us because God is good. That changes everything, and realigns religion on an unbreakable foundation. It also creates very healthy ego structures.

There is no accounting for God's love. God's love is not earned. There is nothing we can do to attain it or even to lose it. All we can do is surrender to it, trust it, and let it flow through us. The significant difference, therefore, is not between those who are worthy of God's love and those who are unworthy. (We are all, Saints and Popes and Dalai Lamas included, in various degrees of unworthy.) The only significant difference is between those who know and enjoy God's love and those who do not know and do not enjoy this total gift. That is a major transformation of consciousness! It moves us from life as an obstacle course to be endured, to life as a banquet to be eaten and shared. It moves religion from fear to love.

It can be difficult for us to be comfortable with this truth. This is especially so if we think in terms of a merit system where we can change God's thoughts about us by doing good or doing evil. It seems that we cannot absorb this message through conventional thinking, but rather the Holy Spirit must somehow subvert our normal patterns of merit, reward and punishment.

Human love depends upon the merits of the object in question: Is the person worthy of my love? Is he/she attractive? It's because we find something beautiful that we are attracted to it. That's the only way we know how to love. God's love, however, is completely different because it is not determined by the object. It is determined by the subject, by God's Self. By loving us, God is being true to God's Self, more than working out some arithmetic about our degree of worthiness or merit. If God waits around for true merit, God would never love anybody or anything.

The thought of deserving or being worthy of love deeply satisfies both the mind and the performing self (ego). Radical or pure grace is a major affront to both the mind and the ego. It

leaves us powerless, and we do not like that. In fact, we actively resist it.

This is what makes the growing subtext of the Bible absolutely extraordinary and revelatory. The meritocracy system is finally destroyed once and for all, especially by the time the Risen Jesus is revealed. Every time God forgives us, or shows mercy, God has broken his own commitment to justice, perfection, quid pro quo, or tit for tat. Forgiveness is always God breaking God' s own "rules"! The Risen Christ literally breaks through locked doors and "breathes" forgiveness--and that after his persecution, rejection, denial, torture, and murder. (John 20:22.) It is, henceforth, an upside down universe.

Perhaps nowhere in the parables do we see God' s covenant love manifest more than in the recurring theme of the free but resented banquet. In Matthew 22, the master is sending his servants to call everyone to a wedding feast (note the symbolism of loving union). But, one by one, the invited guests make excuses: One has just bought some land, another has duties of business. The master becomes furious and sends out his servants again, this time to the "crossroads in town" to collect "everyone they could find, bad and good alike" (v.10). The banquet hall is finally filled not with worthy people but with willing people! He is always expanding the meaning of the table, even breaking clear social conventions, to communicate the hospitality and inclusivity of God.

"Grace demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude" (Isak Dinesen). If we are grateful and if we are deeply confident, we are probably doing it right. And when we are grateful and confident, we will spend most of our lives trying to give it all back--somewhere, anywhere.

Yes, information can lead us to trust a personal encounter, a personal encounter can lead us into relationship, relationships can transform us--almost in spite of ourselves--and even transform us into our truest and deepest self. That is how dependent and socially contagious we are. Whenever there is a truly personal and humanizing encounter, God is born anew in both parties.