

## EXPERIENCING THE TRANSFIGURATION

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Douglas Coupland was one of the first people to write about Generation X. In a book a few years ago, he described an experience that changed his understanding of life. Like many young couples, he was discovering that marriage is not easy.

His mother came to visit him and as she was washing dishes and cleaning up his kitchen, she talked. "First there is love," she told him, "then there is disenchantment and then there is the rest of your life."

"But what about the rest of your life?" he asked. "What about all the time that remains?"

"Oh, there's friendship. Or at least familiarity. And there's safety and there's sleep."

Coupland thought to himself, "How do any of us know that it's going to end up like this? That this is all there was maybe going to be?"

"O God," he says.

"Honey, God is what keeps us together after the love is gone."

"Now here is my secret," Coupland tells us. "I tell it with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words.

"My secret is that I need God – that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love. God's hands – the hands that heal; the hands that hold; the hands we desire because they are better than desire. These hands – the hands that care, the hands that mold; the hands that touch the lips, the lips that speak the words

– the words that tell us we are whole.”<sup>i</sup>

That experience was for Coupland a time of transfiguration when light came on in his darkness. It was a time of transformation when he realized that he needed God.

People have always sought God, especially when they felt sick and weak, or incapable of love, when they needed wholeness. Where do we find God?

God has always been sought in isolation, in quiet, in solitude, on mountaintops.

The Chinese word for “busy” is composed of two characters: “heart” and “killing.” When we make ourselves so busy that we are always rushing around trying to get this or that “done,” or “over with,” we kill something vital in ourselves, and we smother the quiet wisdom of our heart. Always striving for speed and efficiency, we lose the capacity to appreciate the million quiet moments that may bring us peace, beauty and joy. As we seek salvation through our frantic productivity and accomplishments, we squander the teachings that may be present in this very moment, in the richness of this particular breath. Busyness makes us deaf to what is healing and sacred. The art of the quiet is where we find our safety, our belonging and our healing.

Moses went up on the mountaintop to find God in the quiet solitude. Indeed Moses was called by God to meet there. But Moses did not see God. Moses met God, and experienced God, and spoke with God, but Moses didn’t actually see God. God was in the cloud.

No one ever sees God, people believed, because no one could see God – and live. God was too powerful and we too fragile to behold. God is always veiled. God protects people appearing in the cloud or the fire or the pillar in the wilderness. Actually seeing God would suck the breath out of you. It would dissolve your bones and turn your flesh into ash, vapourizing you into pure spirit on the spot. Of course, no one knew for sure whether that was true because it had never actually happened to anyone.

One day, however, Moses got brave on the mountain and asked to see God's glory. God obliged wedging Moses into a cleft in the rock and covering Moses with God's hand. When God passed, God quickly uncovered him and Moses saw God's back. That's all. Only God's back but such a powerful experience was it that Moses was transfigured. The skin of his face shone and when he came back down the mountain people were afraid. They knew that Moses had not just met and talked with God in the quiet of the mountaintop. Moses had seen God.<sup>ii</sup>

A thousand years later Jesus withdrew to a mountaintop as he often did for prayer and refreshment. He withdrew with three of his disciples and as they watched him pray, his face changed. It got whiter and brighter until his whole body was as blinding as the sun, his garments like pure light. It just stayed on him, crackling with power while Moses and Elijah appeared inside the glory with him. The disciples were awestruck. It was a sign to them that God had faced them in Jesus. As Paul would say later, "We have seen the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."<sup>iii</sup> And they were afraid, they were afraid when they heard once again the baptismal voice of God declare, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." But Jesus came and touched them and said, "Rise, and have no fear."

Now two thousand years later, where do we go for that kind of experience? We need God too. We need God to speak words that tell us we are whole. Where do we go to find that transforming, transfiguring experience that will fill us with light and reveal the presence of God? An experience of power?

When Jesus came down off the mountain, he was no longer shining like the sun. It was as if the glory of God was now within him, or perhaps it was the glory of God already in him that was released on that mountaintop, if only for a moment. The people at the base of the mountaintop did not have the benefit of the experience. And Jesus' three friends weren't talking; he had told them not to. How would anyone else see the glory of God in Jesus? How could they?

In Raphael's painting of the *Transfiguration*, there are two

scenes. On the top of the mountain, we see Jesus floating in the sky with Moses and Elijah with him surrounded by the glory of God. The three disciples cower on the ground covering their eyes. At the base of the mountain is a second scene. There is a frantic father and his epileptic son. The disciples of Jesus have been unable to cure him. One of the disciples points up the mountain where the Master has gone. When you look at the boy in the midst of a seizure his eyes and his outstretched arm point there too.

How will people see the glory of God? How will they experience the transfiguration? How will they be transformed? They will see the glory of God in the hands that care and mold and heal and hold. When Jesus came down off the mountaintop, he met the epileptic boy and healed him.<sup>iv</sup> Jesus was transfigured not just on the mountaintop by God's glory but in the valley by God's love. The light shone in his eyes, and through his hands and words. The people saw the glory of God not in blazing light but in the revealing acts of caring and love.

If you examine the religious and scriptural paintings of Rembrandt, you can find Jesus by looking for the light. Rembrandt structures the light so that it focuses on Jesus. He shows the radiance which shone from his face to illuminate and to heal those who came to him.

The glory of God shines through the acts of those who care as God cares, love as God loves and work to bring forth a world as God wants it to be.

These transfiguring and transforming experiences are all around us if we have the eyes to see. They are experiences that will change us forever.

The vantage point of a minister during a wedding is different from the rest of the congregation. We are right up close. We see the smiles and the tears. We hear the trembling in the voice. Every now and then, something special happens. The love in the hearts of the couple shines so brightly you can see it in their eyes as they gaze at each other. It's a moment of transfiguration and you know the world will never be the same for it.

Even a television show can touch the heart, bring God close and transform us. On the television series *Chicago Hope* the hospital's lawyer, Alan Birch, was shot by a member of a street gang. Jeffrey Geiger, just named the best cardiac surgeon in the country, cannot save him. This death becomes a spiritual emergency for the usually puffed-up doctor. It becomes a time of transformation. He quits his job so that he can take care of his godchild, Alan's baby girl, declaring, "I am not going to be the center of the rest of my life." It is a time of transfiguration. Watching it opens yourself up to God and you too declare, "I'm too will not be the centre of the rest of my life. There is something bigger and grander than me, my pride and my ego." The watcher is transformed.

In the series *NYPD Blue*, Andy Sipowicz is a New York detective. He's tough, "rough-hewn," volatile, gauche, a recovering alcoholic not known for his sensitive behaviour. In one episode, he is investigating the murder of the only child of two Polish immigrants. The child's body was found in a vacant lot almost directly across the street from their apartment.

The next day Andy returns to the scene to find the parents standing on the sidewalk. They point to a white bird on the top of a nearby building. The parents had decided that their son's spirit had returned in the form of the bird to assure them that his soul was all right. They asked him if he could see the light coming from the bird. Andy looked up with the expression of a man who has seen too much death and is not easily surprised. But as he stood next to the grieving parents, he softened, "I think there is something there," he said quietly. And you could see it too.

Times like this are times of transfiguration. They change us. They transform us. But the ultimate experience of transfiguration is when the glory of God shines not in someone else but in ourselves.

There is a story about seeing God.

God decided to become visible to a king and to a peasant. An angel was sent to inform them of this blessed event. "O king," the angel announced, "God has deigned to be revealed to

you in whatever manner you wish. In what form do you want God to appear?"

Seated pompously on his throne and surrounded by awe-struck subjects, the king royally proclaimed, "How else would I wish to see God, save in majesty and power? Show God to us in the full glory of power."

God granted his wish and appeared as a bolt of lightning that instantly pulverized the king and his court. Nothing, not even a cinder, remained.

The angel then manifested herself to a peasant saying, "God deigns to be revealed to you in whatever manner you desire. How do you wish to see God?"

Scratching his head and puzzling a long while, the peasant finally said, "I am a poor man and not worthy to see God face to face. But if it is God's will to be revealed to me, let it be in those things with which I am familiar. Let me see God in the earth I plough, the water I drink, and the food I eat. Let me see the presence of God in the faces of my family, neighbours, and – if God deems it as good for myself and others – even in my own reflection as well."

God granted the peasant his wish, and he lived a long and happy life. And the world was never the same again.<sup>v</sup>

So may it be for you and me. So may it be. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Quoted in *Aha!!!* Vol. 8, # 2 (January – March, 1999), p. 32.

<sup>ii</sup> Exodus 33 and 34.

<sup>iii</sup> 2 Corinthians 4: 6.

<sup>iv</sup> Matthew 17: 14-21.

<sup>v</sup> From *Peacemaking Day by Day*, quoted in Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, *Spiritual Literacy*, Scribner (1996), pp. 36, 37.