

Transformative Change:

Honesty
Responsibility
Courage
Humility

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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter 1	The Invitation
5	
Chapter 2	Groundwork
	23
Chapter 3	Life in Deception
	37
Chapter 4	Ruthless Honesty
	55
Chapter 5	The Shame Pit
83	
Chapter 6	The Blame Game
	99
Chapter 7	Responsibility: Freedom to Love
117	
Chapter 8	Petrified by Fear
	133
Chapter 9	A Profile in Courage
153	
Chapter 10	Pride

	173
Chapter 11	Humility 189
Chapter 12	Toward Maturity 211
About the Authors	221

In dedication to those who seek after truth, personal responsibility, courage and humility, and who have allowed us to share the journey with them.

THE INVITATION

We who came into this world wired one way must go through a series of changes at the soul level until we leave this world wired another way.

Steve DeNeff and David Drury

As humans, we hurt. Some of us just want relief from pain, and when that relief comes, we are satisfied, even if it occurs without a change of heart. Yet others desire more than freedom from discomfort. Our belief is that God uses our pain to invite us to take a look inside of ourselves. He wants to not merely give us new coping skills; he desires to work within us to transform our hearts. This transformative change occurs in four interior shifts that lead us to truth, personal responsibility, courage and humility.

WHAT IS CHANGE?

"Doctor, doctor, fix me – and can you please make it painless and quick!" As a practicing psychologist for more than twenty-five years (Mike), this is the plea I've heard from almost every client who has come to my office. And as a Salvation Army pastor, pastoral counselor and social service administrator (JoAnn), I'd be able to close down the shelter I'm currently working with if this request could be granted.

Our clients may not have used those exact words, but we live in a time when people want and demand quick action. Fast food, the ten-minute oil change, express check-outs – we want what we want and we want it now. Our desire for immediate, painless results carries over into the mental health and spiritual formation arenas as well.

Raised on the abbreviated sequences of Sesame Street, our attention spans tend to be short, and evidenced by our liberal use of credit cards, our willingness to delay gratification is nearly non-existent. Given this mindset, and the expectations of a "bottom-line" health care system, there is little wonder that the "fix me now" mentality is as prevalent in the counseling office as it is in the emergency room.

Yet as we have worked with seekers of healing, there are those whose words have changed from their initial desperation to be fixed, to words such as these: "Michael, my brother in Christ, please journey with me in my desire to be deeply changed so that I might reflect the character of Christ in my daily life." "JoAnn, I know that I have screwed up my life, but I want to be different, deep down inside."

Much of our work in psychology, social service and pastoral care is to help our clients stop their self-defeating behaviors or control their debilitating anxiety, or to stay out of jail or maintain

employment longer than two weeks. Yet as Christians, our hearts are strangely warmed when the invitation to penetrate beyond the surface symptoms is offered to us. We are encouraged by this invitation because we know that while outward changes may improve our circumstances for a time, down deep, in our soul, transformative change is needed – and possible.

What do we believe about change? How does change occur? Is change defined as conforming to a standard, or is change a radical transformation of the heart? We may be good at making the outside changes that affect our situations for a time, but in our soul, in our heart, we long for transformational change. As believers in Christ, we don't want to be described as Jesus did the Pharisees: "The religion scholars and Pharisees are competent teachers in God's Law. You won't go wrong in following their teachings on Moses. But be careful about following them. They talk a good line, but they don't live it. They don't take it into their hearts and live it out in their behavior. It's all spit-and-polish veneer" (Matthew 23, MSG).

How can we move beyond the "spit-and-polish veneer" Jesus warned against? Christ offers hope that if we can be honest with our inner selves, we can actually be freed from pretensions. The problem is that most of us don't know how to live in a way that truly flows from our inner selves.

JoAnn tells of her encounter with Craig. I first saw Craig on a Tuesday as he was being admitted to the drug and alcohol rehabilitation center. He had obviously been on the street for a while, as his clothing was disheveled, his eyes were bleary, his odor over-powering and his facial hair definitely not designer stubble. When I visited the center the following Sunday, I was amazed at the change that had taken place in Craig. He could have stepped off the cover of GQ! He was cleaned up and dressed up. To the casual observer, he had been transformed.

As with Craig, change on the outside is possible. We can put on the clothing of modified behavior, cognitive restructuring, and emotional stability, and we can follow eight steps to a healthy marriage or twelve steps to sobriety, experiencing changes in our day-to-day lives. Craig was able to clean himself up by washing, shaving, and putting on new clothing, and he was even beginning to address the issues of his addictive behavior. While we can celebrate what we see in the Craigs of the world, those kinds of actions do not change a self-indulgent character or restore the numbness of the deadened soul. I did celebrate what I saw in Craig, for it was good. Yet I wanted more for him. Change that develops powerful love for Christ and healthy and holy love for others does not come by way of a shower and a shave.

As Craig began to feel better about himself, and became conformed to the norms of the church fellowship he was involved with, he was not challenged to look at the deeper parts of his heart. He believed that he was "healed" but it was apparent that the issues he faced were simply numbed and neglected. It would only be years later that they would emerge in the form of struggles with relationships and pornography.

RELIGION AND CHANGE

Throughout the history of Christianity, change has been expected from those who follow Christ. Jesus challenged the woman accused of adultery to "go and sin no more." He urged his

disciples to “humble yourselves like a child,” and to forgive each other “seventy times seven.” The rich young ruler was charged with selling his possessions and giving to the poor, while Nicodemus was given the challenge of being born again. Often the church has focused on outward behavior or “right thinking,” as in successful Christian living, marriages that work, raising kids God’s way, or on specific signs of grace. This has led to the unspoken belief that the gospel teaches that our days with Jesus flow smoothly, and when our life is in Christ, struggle is eliminated.

Conforming to a standard and practicing the precepts given do lead to change, and secular tools teaching coping strategies abound. Yet transformative change within the life of the believer is not accomplished by finding better ways to adapt to the challenges around us. The change we desire in our lives and desire for you as you interact with the questions in this book, is the kind of change that will help us embrace who we are, the good, the bad, the ugly, the beautiful, and recognize without shame who we are not. Only when we stop our self-improvement efforts aimed at redefining our past, will we be free to allow the Holy Spirit to bring us closer to “being conformed to the likeness of his Son” (Jesus) as Paul speaks of in Romans 8.

As a part of our expression of faith, being conformed to the image of Christ involves certain behavioral changes, as it includes following the pattern of lifestyle set forth in the scriptures, and depends upon the Spirit of God to give direction and power. However, true transformational change primarily occurs within our hearts, within our character, because it is out of the essence of the inner man or woman that Christlike behavior flows.

CUT TO THE HEART

We are often trained to quiet down or ignore our hearts rather than being invited to follow Christ from our hearts. When we look too deeply within, our thoughts and emotions can be seen as too muddled, too confusing, too unpredictable, and even too dangerous. Some churches thrive on conflict-free people, on nice, helpful people who don’t ask much of each other. And when those who are deeply wounded seek help, too often the church becomes like those described in Jeremiah 6: “They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. ‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace.”

JoAnn relates the following interaction: I met with a friend who had been in therapy for eight years with the same therapist. Her words were telling: “It seems as though we spend most of our sessions together talking about what I see as being the distractions in my life, my weight, my anxiety over schooling, my family situation, etc. I want to go deeper than that. I want to expose the darkness in my life so that I can be different, not just act differently.” I encouraged her to explore that with her therapist, and if that didn’t make a difference, then suggested it was time for her to look for a new counselor, because deeper change is possible.

Robert Quinn wrote a book on corporate leadership and change, but his words capture the essence of the transformational spiritual change we are encouraging: “Making a deep change involves abandoning both [our knowledge and competence] and walking naked into the land of uncertainty.”

Another description is in the writings of Henri Nouwen, the Catholic priest who himself powerfully modeled the relationship between behavioral change and the work of the heart as he left the success of the academic world and entered Daybreak, a group home for profoundly handicapped people. He described his experience: "This is the mystery of the Christian life: to receive a new self, a new identity, which depends not on what we can achieve, but on what we are willing to receive." For transformation to occur, it is necessary to challenge the commitments of the heart and to receive the gift of grace.

HEART COMMITMENTS

One of the most disturbing accounts in the gospels is that of the rich young ruler in Mark 10:17-22. In this encounter, Christ goes beyond behavior and outward service to the commitments of the heart. Listen to the interaction:

Man: "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus: "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'"

Man: "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth."

Jesus: (looked at him and loved him) "You lack one thing. Go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

At this, Mark tells us, the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

In this short dialogue, Jesus accomplished a great deal. First, he challenged the young man's assumptions and his public self. Why do you call me good? Is it something you heard about me? Did you see me heal someone? Do I fit your preconceived idea of a "good" person? You don't even know me. How can you call me good? Jesus knew it was difficult for this young man to put aside what he had established as spirituality, but it was essential. Until those assumptions are shaken to the core, until only what cannot be shaken remains (Hebrews 12), we cannot experience the transformation Christ yearns to bring about in us.

Not only did Jesus challenge his assumptions, but he also changed the agenda. This is not about behavior; it is about your heart. Yes, I know you've followed the law, but I want to know who you really are. Are you willing to go down a different path? Again, Jesus knew where he was asking the young man to go. If I deeply care about you, I will ask for all of you. The questions this young man had to face were, Are you really willing to engage with me? Do you want to take me on? Because if you do, I will take you to the core of your being, I will expose the depths of your heart, and you may not like what I show you.

When we hear these words from Jesus, we tend to shy away as did the young man, because that kind of exposure, that kind of risk is frightening, and we're not looking for that. All too often, we

want a faith that will make us feel good, not one that calls us to face ourselves in such a desperate way.

THE GIFT OF GRACE

Seven words describe what happened next. "He looked at him and loved him." Whenever the Spirit of God is urging us toward change, that picture of grace must always be present. God does not demand out of punishment, instead, he invites from love. He waits with the porch light on, he searches for the lost sheep, and he woos us from his incredible reservoir of mercy, grace and love. And he does that knowing exactly who we are, for God looks at us, naked, shamed, ugly, and he loves us. Jesus looked at this man, knowing it was possible he would fail to reach him, and yet loved him. Perhaps that look was a foreshadowing of the look Jesus gave Peter, his disciple, in the courtyard of the High Priest prior to the crucifixion (Luke 22:54-62). It's as if we can hear Christ's thoughts in that look: though you may break my heart with your failure, still you are loved. In that moment, Jesus' look at Peter reminds us of God's promise to Jeremiah, "Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love . . ." (Jeremiah 31:3, KJV).

Ultimately, however, Jesus went for the jugular. He knew what the young man would have to release in order to follow him, and Jesus asked for it. In his exposure of the young man, Jesus didn't back him into a corner. Instead, he gave him a way to keep moving. In essence, Jesus said to him, you've followed the rules all of your life. Now I want your heart, yet I know your heart is bound to riches. I know it will be costly, but that doesn't keep me from asking for it.

Our hearts may be bound to something other than riches, such as self-delusion, self-pity, fear, pride, or success, but the plea of Jesus is the same: I want your heart. What will it take to reach it? If we listen carefully to Christ's call to be honest about who we are and what we want, we will hear his invitation to explore and pursue the deepest thirsts of our hearts. And as we embrace those thirsts, we will become free to follow him with truth, responsibility, courage, and humility.

WHAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE?

Who really changes? What makes a difference? What would it have taken for the rich young ruler to accept what Jesus was offering? What is it that enables people to set aside the shiny veneer in order to bring about the transforming change we are urged to seek in Romans 12:2? "Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect his will really is" (NLT).

When people come to counseling for the first time, many are motivated to seek change because of their pain. Often, their main goal in seeking therapy is to gain relief from the painful circumstances of their lives. Knowledgeable, sincere people may say they want to know how to

handle their anger with their spouse, their frustration with their children, and their inability to get along with co-workers, yet their energy tells a different story. They are really looking for a way to change a troubling person or situation, but not for a way to disrupt the “stuff” within themselves. In response, competent therapists work hard to listen carefully with compassion and care to the dilemma presented before them. Clarifying, probing, and basic problem-solving are appropriate throughout therapy.

Yet there are other, less practical questions to be asked. What is God trying to change in this person? How willing is this person to look at his or her own life and allow disruption to enter? What sort of character, what kind of heart does this individual possess? Do they even know? Ultimately, our goal is to move the focus from the relief of painful circumstances to the exploration of character within the person we are talking with so they can begin to respond to changing circumstances from a strengthened character rather than only from a self-serve menu of psychological and spiritual principles and techniques.

With a combined total of more than sixty years in ministry, we’ve had the privilege of working with some people who have taught us how true change occurs. The best way to learn how to counsel is to listen carefully to people who change, and as we’ve listened, we’ve been told that our theories and techniques were helpful, but the theories and techniques did not cause them to change in meaningful ways. When we have taken the role of a student to our mentor clients, we have discovered four basic themes that tend to recur among those who change in their inner being, whose change is transformative.

These themes point toward four shifts within the soul that occur in transformative change. They are not offered as four steps to spiritual growth, but instead as models of movement that can bring a transformational approach to the pursuit of maturity. We generally see them in terms of shifting or moving toward, rather than a dramatic arrival, because we never truly “arrive” this side of heaven. Maturity is not “getting our act together;” instead, it is allowing God to use our weaknesses, our messiness, and our vulnerable lives to show his glory. As Paul testified, “No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us” (Philippians 3:13-14, NLT).

The testimony of many of the saints through the centuries is that the closer they came to God, the more aware they became of their sinfulness, which in turn freed them from the need for pretense. As St. Augustine noted, “The saints are praiseworthy not because of their sinlessness, but because of their poignant awareness of their continuing sin and their striving in hope for a perfection that will become reality only after death.” The good news is told to us by Robertson Davis, writing in *Fifth Business*: “If these, those holy ones [saints] who have lived so greatly but who still carry their shadows with them, can approach God, well, then, there is hope for the worst of us.”

SHIFT 1 DECEPTION TO HONESTY

A first shift in the work of transformative change is the capacity to move from deceit to

honesty. Honesty is painful, and if we can create a scenario less painful or disturbing than reality, we will. The movement from deception to honesty involves the initial recognition that we fear truth. It is natural to deceive ourselves about what we see, what we hear, what we feel, what we want, and what we believe, but we cannot remain there.

Moving from a false reality (deceit) to a true reality (honesty) is difficult. Dishonesty can be more comfortable than honesty, at least until it is exposed. Remembering Dad as fun-loving is easier than seeing him as a man who publicly humiliated his wife in order to get a laugh. Pretending that a marriage is satisfying is less disturbing than addressing the ache of loneliness that lies within. Yet until we embrace what is true, we will not be able to truly seek the transformative change that Christ offers to us.

SHIFT 2 SHAME AND BLAME TO RESPONSIBILITY

A second shift toward godly maturity is the ability and determination to leave the shame/blame game and move toward the acceptance of personal, productive responsibility. Shame, a paralyzing awareness of our failures and inadequacies, and blame, a hatred of others for the hurt they have caused us, achieve the same result. Shame and blame consume or deaden our best energies and enable us to avoid facing our need for change and to ignore our responsibility to move. The more energy we put into the shame/blame game, the less energy we will have to work on real, substantive change.

Putting aside our blame of others for our negative circumstances or our shame over what we've done, opens the door for a freedom to live productively even when we totally blow it, or when we are hurt by others. It also allows us to accept ourselves as we are, acknowledge the circumstances we are in, and assume appropriate responsibility for ourselves. As the old spiritual reminds us, "It's me, it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer." It's me. I hurt my brother, I failed you, I ran away, and I am standing before you, God, in the need of prayer, in need of confession, repentance and grace.

SHIFT 3 FEAR TO COURAGE

A person desiring transformational change also makes a third shift: from fear to courage. No one enjoys the pain of failure, while betrayal and rejection by others expose raw nerves in our soul. In our attempts to move forward, we are urged to try one more time, but this often seems masochistic. Yet it is when we want to give up because the pain and humiliation seem unbearable, and when trying one more time feels like the height of foolishness, that those who change find the strength to keep moving forward.

The key ingredient in the movement from fear to courage is hope. If hope is dead, courage will not be alive and fear will dominate. To make the shift away from fear, we must redefine what we

place our hope in, as well as determine what hope looks like for us. Courage will allow us to see what is true, face our responsibility, and risk loving again in a deeper way.

SHIFT 4 PRIDE TO HUMILITY

A fourth transformative shift moves us from pride to humility. Pride is demonstrated by our own insistence that we ought to be better than we are. As we attend spiritual growth seminars, read self-help books, and wake up at 4:00 a.m., determined to be alert enough to practice our spiritual disciplines, we are impressed by this thought: there is something I can do to substantially change my essence.

Yet when we give up the hoped-for magic wand of transformation, we discover that God is really good at teaching us humility if we let him. God will truly show us ourselves when we ask and when we are ready to accept his judgment and his mercy. Humility is born when we embrace the truth that in our inner nature, we are still ourselves, fallen image bearers of God. As we move toward humility, we know ourselves as we truly are and are freed from the pressure to become someone we are not.

We don't have to measure up to super-spiritual standards; in fact, we can't! Humility calls us to repent of the arrogance of our demands for self-improvement, and allow the power of God to use us and change us with his transformational energy. We must die to our pride in order to live in humility. Pride is like a virus, in that its symptoms can be treated but it cannot be killed. We will always struggle with our bent toward sin, but we can walk an empowering road to humility as we face the tough issues with honesty.

When we despair of our prideful commitments to perfect ourselves, we are free to humbly accept that in Christ, we have arrived. We are acceptable to God not because of anything we have done, but because of Jesus. Most of us believe this concept in our heads, but in our hearts, we doubt and therefore are driven to self-perfection.

This, then, is our premise. Deception to truth. Shame and blame to personal responsibility. Fear to courage. Pride to humility. These four key areas of movement bring God's children closer to him in authentic relationship as our lives are marked more and more by gratitude and grace. They are not easy areas to address, but absolutely vital if we desire the transforming work of God in our souls.

I have learned that prayer is not asking for what you think you want, but asking to be changed in ways you can't imagine.

Kathleen Norris

SHIFTWORK

1. Daniel Nielson writes: "Everything is in a constant state of change. Like the wind that shifts a mountain of sand one grain at a time, the Spirit of God is always moving. Don't opt for what is comfortable. And don't resist change when it comes. It doesn't serve your higher purpose. Accept

that a shift is taking place and allow the wind to move you forward – and blow away the refuse at the same time.” What is your initial reaction to his words?

2. At first reading, which of the four shifts strikes you as the most difficult for you? Why do you think that is? Which of the four shifts seems the easiest for you? Why?

3. In his book *God of Surprises*, Gerald Hughes writes: “Our real sin is in refusing, or fearing to turn back, either because we are quite content with ourselves as we are, or because we think we must first put ourselves in order before we can turn to him [Jesus].” Do you fit either of his descriptions? What would it be like for you to turn to God more deliberately?