

Surrender and Transform

Reflections on the Easter Story, 2010

Today in Christian churches the world over, churches, brightly relit and festooned with flowers after the Lenten bleakness, the faithful celebrate Jesus' resurrection. They celebrate a miraculous transformation – his transformation from a life corporeal into a new life where time -- past, present and future -- and dimension -- earthly and heavenly -- and life – momentary and eternal – all fuse in the born-again person of Jesus in his new body, physically restored yet somehow ethereally transformed. And what is the overwhelming emotion of this day for those faithful? Joy! Joy -- the emotion not of momentary happiness, but of the deep experience of loving and being loved. Joy – the emotion of being in harmony with – that is, surrendering to and accepting -- your destiny. It is the emotion associated with what Joseph Campbell called “The Hero's Journey.”

Surrender ... transformation ... joy. The essence of the Easter story. In these is contained the message and the invitation for all of us. And best of all, you don't even have to believe that Jesus actually rose from the dead to get it.

Hero journeys begin with the call, the cry -- often felt as a deep disquiet that summons you to rise above your fears and your doubts and your smallness -- to find the resources of character to meet your destiny ... to find the wisdom, the power and the will to serve others ... to *be* the gift that the Cosmos manifests in you and to give that gift – yourself – to others. To find the courage to start a journey that may begin in fearful surrender to a path fraught with challenge and moments of pain and unhappiness, but that ends in bliss.

Reflect on Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. He knows that his enemies are closing in and, once taken, he will not escape their wrath. Jesus doesn't want to suffer at their hands. He's terrified at the prospect of torture and possibly death. He pleads to his god begging "Let this cup be taken from me." Gospel writer, Luke – ever the physician --includes the observation that Jesus "in his anguish prayed ... and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground." But like all great myth-heroes, Jesus accepts, even embraces, his destiny. And in that moment of surrender, he comes to deep serenity and joy. It's that serene Jesus, sure that he is living out the destiny that the Cosmos demands, it is that Jesus you meet as he faces the Sanhedrin and the High Priest, and stands before Pontius Pilate. Surrendering to what the Cosmos asks of him, Jesus transcends fear and the lure of fleeting happiness and with deep and joyful confidence finds the courage to accept the humiliations and sufferings of a day that begins in an unjust trial in Jerusalem and ends in the agony of crucifixion on the hill of Golgotha.

Now, these hero-journeys would be nothing more than fools' errands if their stories ended there. But they don't. The grace and courage they showed – and show us – ends in triumph. In resurrection!

Don't be scared away by that word. Resurgere doesn't just mean to rise from the dead. Strictly speaking it doesn't mean that at all; it means to be restored, revived, or to lift oneself above. And isn't this, my friends, the precise message – the invitation – the challenge – of the Easter story? It is not the call to believe in a rising from the dead which never happened. Rather it is what Nikos Kazantzakis describes as the Cosmic "aching cry,"

"Leave the mud, stand up, give birth to your better self!"

It is the Cosmos' reminder that each of us has within us a great gift to give – the Cosmos' invitation to each of us to surrender our fears and obstinacies and take up the hero's journey to meet our destiny of transforming into that unique incarnate gift of god to the world that each of us truly is!

Now, I in no way equate myself with Jesus; let's be clear about that. But I have been experiencing resurrection in recent years. My past has been resurrecting. It must have meaning beyond just nostalgia, I think, meaning that begins to make some sense for me through the lenses of Campbell's 'Hero Journey' and the gospel writers' story of Easter. I share this in the hope that it may offer some meaning to you, too.

The first resurrection was my rediscovery of this leather-bound "Life of Christ." [Hold up to show] It was a 10th birthday gift signed by every one of the Redemptorist priests and brothers of the community that served my parish. Their way of telling me that I was called to Catholic priesthood in the Redemptorist Order.

I thought so, too, and so, a few summers later I stood on the train platform waiting for the Broadway Limited that would begin my journey toward ordination. I was 14 and filled with a cyclone of emotions from intense joy to abject fear, but certain in my call – or at least as certain as a 14 year old could be.

Through the minor seminary years, those storms of emotions would persist – from desperate loneliness during a long period of ostracism, to heights of elation when I was selected for the Gregorian Schola. But through the highs and lows, I held a firmness of belief that I was following my vital design.

The next artifact resurrected a couple of years later. This is the ceremonial of what's called investiture and profession. [Show] It details the ceremonies associated first with the taking on the monastic habit – that marks the start of the Novitiate year of silence, study and mortification. It culminates a year plus a day later by taking temporary vows and formal entry into the religious order.

During that Novitiate year, my prayer life was becoming empty of emotion or meaning. I was talked out of abandoning this path several times by spiritual advisors. Instead, they asked that I put my trust in their wisdom and belief in me, and go forward with my profession of vows. So I did, but with a terror inside that doesn't show in pictures of me from that day -- pictures that also recently resurrected, by the way. I received a 15 decade rosary and draped it over my cincture, a missionary cross which I tucked into a fold of my habit, and a biretta – *the hat not the gun*.

Then it was away to the major seminary, plunging headlong into philosophy, theology, science, history, literature, writing, Greek and Hebrew, and even more Latin and public speaking (as if 4 years of those weren't enough already) -- and eventually Mass practice. Yes, you have to learn how to do it. I loved it all, and if that was all, my journey might have stayed that course.

But there was more than that, and two things grew ever more distressing. First, Gregorian chant was pretty much tossed onto the rubbish heap. The music that so fed my spirit was gone and guitars strumming Kumbaya were never going to fill me up.

But with the latest resurrection, my most painful crisis from back then has burst into memory. A recent basement pipe leak and the need to make room for the plumbers unearthed a long forgotten box, hidden beneath a couple decades of piled up stuff. What I found in that box amazed, shook me up ... took me back to the spiritual crisis of 40 years ago that shifted my path irrevocably.

In that box I found two old gifts from my parents that hit me harder than Proust's madeleines. My mass-practice chalice – it's the silver cup on the altar right now – and my practice ciborium, a special chalice designed to hold the Eucharistic bread --- this bread [open and hold up the host] this 40+ year old Eucharistic host – one of my practice hosts!

Forty-plus years ago with the date for my perpetual vows getting ever closer, I could no longer trust anyone or anything except my own sense of my self and my truth. And that truth was that this spiritual pathway, walked for going on 9 years, was no longer mine. Its spiritual disciplines left me unfilled and partaking of the eucharist meant nothing to me. I had to surrender to that nagging truth, and accept where the consequences might lead.

Campbell says that *in the face of our continued restlessness, as if out of nowhere, there comes the supernatural assisting force that attends the elect through the whole course of the ordeal.* He continues, *“At this moment of decision, this is not what we ought to do, rather we cannot do otherwise. This is the point where our freedom and our destiny merge ... into a domain without maps ... a place of terror and opportunity.”*

And so the journey on a new path began and continues, the journey that in recent years has brought me and kept me, here. During these years new guides have

emerged to sustain me on the adventure. They are the thinkers I now read, among them Ken Wilbur, Fritjof Kapra, Lee Smolin, Pema Chodron, and Ram Das. They are several of our ministers including Bob Throne, Harris Riordan, Walter Moulton and my long and good friend, Claudia Elferdink. They are a few intuitives with whom I can share and interpret my occasional side-trips into non-ordinary reality, such as the shaman, Ayala Guy, and even my co-celebrant today, Bernadette. And finally they are many companion journeyers here at Restoration, including, David Poor and Harald Grote, for example, who force precision into my thinking, and my wife, Chris who puts up with all this.

Campbell's "Hero Journey" and the message of the Gospel Easter story is the same. Each of us is a gift who has a gift. Our call is to find the way to bring that gift alive in our person, to find the whom – the many whoms – your gift is meant for. For some lucky few that journey of discovery might be short, straight and not filled with perils. For others, like me I think, the way is long, and twisting and often painful. But we are all placed on that path, and it is for us to choose to walk it – *or not*. Where are you ... today?

I want to bring this sermon to a close quoting from two deep thinkers. First, I offer you 5 transformative questions posed by transpersonal psychologist, Deah Curry. I'd ask all of to find your answers to these, but it's especially important for those among us who beneath the surface of happy lives still feel that restlessness:

1. How are you being the world's medicine? Being the medicine is about how you are living your life using the spiritual power that is innate within you. What can you further develop in order to be the world's medicine more fully?

2. What do you trust? Notice I didn't ask who. This question is asking: in what do you place your belief that all is and will be as it should be?

3. For what cause would you give your life and would historians say this is what you actually gave your life energy to? Are you really living a life of purpose and meaning now, and if not, what needs to change? Remember, what you put your attention on grows. Are you growing what you want to be growing? Are you being the change you hope to see? Can you say that with full integrity?

4. How would you describe the sensory experiences of deep peace, contentment, curiosity, soul healing, and connectedness as felt on the insides of your body? Have you ever thought about how such qualities of mind/body/spirit and experience have bodily, sensory components? Try paying attention to this some time.

5. At the end of your life, what will you have dared so that you can pass on with no regrets? Daring to take risks is one of the most essential transformative energies that I know of for both spiritual development and mental health. In fact many problems –physical, mental and interpersonal -- start from a fear of risking being fully seen as our authentic selves, fear of asserting our whole truth, fear of risking rejection and abandonment by those we love, fear of risking pride or security, and other large and small risks. Daring is a catalyst for becoming everything we are meant to be. And I don't mean daring to skydive or bungee jump. It's about daring to live a life as large as you can envision. Try it; it's a powerful medicine

I challenge you to take these questions down as deep as you can with as much honesty as you can stand. I invite you to surrender, today, to the consequences of your answers. Take that step – perhaps your first step in all honesty – on your path to transformation. That journey toward fully living out the unique facet of divinity that you are.

And finally take courage in these words of Joseph Campbell that you heard in today's reading:

"... if we have truly committed, there exists beyond ourselves and our willfulness, a powerful force that helps us along the way and nurtures our transformation. *Our journey is guided by invisible hands with infinitely greater accuracy than is possible through our unaided, conscious will* -- the 'supernatural assisting force' that attends 'the elect' and delivers him or her finally to BLISS."

Happy Easter and BLISS-ed be!