

Seeds of Change and Transformers: Our New Names

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***The Readings:* St. Francis and the Sow, by Galway Kinnell:**

The bud
stands for all things,
even for those things that don't flower,
for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;
though sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness,
to put a hand on its brow
of the flower
and retell it in words and in touch
it is lovely
until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing;
as St. Francis put his hand on the creased forehead
of the sow, and told her in words and in touch
blessings of earth on the sow, and the sow
began remembering all down her thick length,
from the earthen snout all the way
through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of
the tail,
from the hard spininess spiked out from the spine
down through the great broken heart
to the blue milken dreaminess spurting and shuddering
from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths sucking
and blowing beneath them:
the long, perfect loveliness of sow.

Genesis 32: 22-31: Jacob wrestles with an angel all night, receives a new name, a blessing, and a limp that lasts throughout his life, from an injury during the struggle.

The Sermon: Summertime, and the living is *growing*—seeds have sprouted and are sending up leaves, unfurling flowers. I have ordered and planted organic heirloom seeds from a company that calls itself Seeds of Chang—maybe you've heard of it? I'm always amazed by the transformations that happen in the good earth. A tiny dot brings forth columbines; a hard, flat teardrop becomes a Halloween jack-o-lantern. The company's name suggests two kinds of change—transformation from seed to plant, and then that larger cultural transformation we hope is happening, from chemical to organic gardening. And knowing these are heirloom seeds reminds me where all transformation is rooted: these are *heirloom* seeds from old, cherished plants; transformation is rooted in history.

Changes in my life have been of two kinds: there's change in circumstance and structure—whether a choice I make or something that happens *to* me; and then there's transformation—an inner shift or restructuring, a new way of thinking, relating, being. For the more external kind I often need to create a plan—though more recently I seem to need a quieter, more listening stance to the changes around me. For inner transformation, the first thing I have to do is let go and trust. That, I find, is a lot harder than coming up with a plan!

Sometimes outer change and inner transformation move together in our lives, one driving the other, not necessarily in any order. Losing a job might give us a new way of thinking about work or even a new calling. Losing spouse and friends to addiction may get an addict to confront him or herself. Or, an inner shift in what we value can change how we spend our time in work, play and relationships. Having gone through some changes, and transformations, in my own life, it seems to me that in order for transformation to work its way with us, we have to cooperate with powers working to change us, powers both in and beyond ourselves.

I remember some toys my son loved when he was young—"Transformers." The transformer looked like a car, radio, or some other innocuous object. When its parts were twisted and turned it would "transform" into a fearsome robot. Reverse the twists and turns and it "transformed" back to its original form. The innocuous object had within it the makings of the robot it could become. And the robot had the makings of the innocuous object. Sort of the way a seed holds within it the makings of the plant.

But not quite: unlike a seed—or a human life—a transformer could only move back and forth between two states; it could not grow into a destiny. "Transformation" to one state or the other could always be reversed. And both states were static: neither held any possibility for further change, or for creativity. Living things transform through genetic mutation, cross fertilization, or responses to growing conditions; in time we wind up with whole new species. "Transformers" *changed*, but they never *transformed*.

Process theologians speak of God and the cosmos as a continuous *process* of change: whatever happens is shaped by what precedes it and shapes what follows it. In process theology, novelty enters the picture and effects a radical transformation—and that is the divine at work. Evolution may be an example. We can even reconcile evolution with divine creation, when we think of God as the agent of novelty entering into an ongoing process.

But we human beings aren't in the business of divine creation—though with current genetic science, we may be getting there...! We're in the business of creating our lives and, to an extent, shaping the world and other lives about us. One of the hardest kinds of change we face is release from our addictions. We know how hard it is if we've struggled with addiction—whether to substances, relationships, gambling, or even to emotionally stuckness. How do we know when we're "addicted"? A definition I found in *Harvard* magazine: "uncontrolled use despite negative consequences." But that's also a classic definition of neurosis. My own working definition of *addiction* is ***preoccupation with a substance, person, behavior, or thought pattern which you seem helpless to release, and which has an adverse impact on your life, your functioning, or your relationships.***

The grip of addiction is powerful—like, as the song used to say, "looking for love in all the wrong places." "A *love affair* with the bottle" is not just a *metaphor* for alcoholism. Popele who love active alcoholics knows they play second fiddle to alcohol. Some drug addicts fail to feed their children. Preoccupation beyond a healthy interest in a hobby or work says to those we love, "my relationship with *this* is more important than my relationship with you." And here's the awful rub: the addictive substance *simulates* the intimacy it prevents. False intimacy with the addictive object substitutes for genuine intimacy. Addiction is really an *intimacy disorder*.

Also a *control disorder*. It may seem counterintuitive to call addiction an attempt to control, when an addict's behavior is so obviously *out* of control. But as with intimacy, the addictive object seems to offer a momentary surge of control as it muffles our distressing sense of lack of control. One more bet gives a fleeting sense that the addict can beat the losing streak. Many are lulled into feeling control of inner emptiness by filling it with excess food. I've certainly done that. Some seek control by eating almost nothing. Sadly, the need for control often affects those who love the addict, too, as they cover up for, clean up after, try to fix.

Intimacy and control: the double-forked root of addiction. And this is why addiction is fundamentally a spiritual disorder. When addictions substitute for intimacy or control, we've lost touch with our spirit. And it doesn't work because guilt and self-loathing cut right through the illusion. We know, even if we don't admit it, that something is still missing, and that it is we who are out of control. Even denial, a fundamental addictive pattern, is really just a false sense of control. As in: "I can hold my drink." Or: "I *have* to manage my family; they can't manage themselves."

Addictive patterns often underlie our resistance to change, and I suspect addictive patterns are very familiar to most of us, even the most sane and balanced among us, of whom I fall short! Scott Peck spoke of addictiveness as idolatry—putting something else in the place of God or the sacred. If "God" or "the sacred" aren't meaningful terms for you, think in terms of *what's really, fundamentally of deepest value*. Isn't it idolatry to put alcohol before our ability to work? Or getting our way before a cherished relationship? And don't we all fall into idolatry at times? Scott Peck said that when he spoke of addictiveness as idolatry and asked his audiences to raise their hands if they'd never behaved addictively, not a single hand would go up!

And so we come to Jacob—addicted to lying and cheating in order to get what he wanted. Jacob, father of the twelve sons who fathered the twelve tribes of Israel, is *not* a very nice guy. He was the second-born twin who was born grabbing his brother's heel as if trying to get born first. Being the firstborn was a very big deal for the ancient Hebrews. He bribed the firstborn, Esau, to give him the firstborn birthright, and tricked his father into giving him the firstborn's blessing. His trickery discovered, he needed to get out of town, so he left for a far country. There, through a combination of hard work and continuing trickery and deceitfulness, he gained two wives, lots of children, and many sheep and goats. He was very rich, but as he wasn't getting on too well with the father of his wives, Leah and Rachel, he headed for the home he'd left behind years ago.

Now here he is. He receives word that his twin, Esau, is approaching with a great retinue of men. Uh-oh. This is the brother he tricked out of his birthright and blessing; he has grown rich in a far country and now returns to live in the land Esau controls. He has good reason to fear Esau, a physically stronger man than himself with every reason to hold a grudge. He divides his party into two parts for insurance that at least part of them will survive any altercation, and sends placating messages and gifts ahead. Then he sends his wives and children to a safe place and spends the night alone.

This reminds me that medieval knights-to-be spent a night alone in prayer before being knighted—which was a big life change. Besides danger, Jacob has Hebrew name "Jacob" means "Usurper." I wonder, too, if he rues his inability to love Leah, whom *he* was tricked into marrying, and his

favoritism toward Rachel. This has caused such rancor in the family. Yes, he's done well, but he has exacted a great price for his success, from people who have a right to expect better of him.

The angel who comes to him brings the message of truth about himself he'd rather not face. But he must if he is to live in peace with his brother, and, though he doesn't know this yet, if he is to become the great founder of the Israelite people. It would be easier to stay in his self-made success, to go off another way, find another land to settle, avoid his brother and the hard work of reconciliation.

We have a saying about how hard it is for us to face the need for change: "better the devil you know than the devil you don't know." But it's no devil Jacob is wrestling with. Jacob might well say, better the devil I know than the *angel* I don't know! Isn't it like this when we struggle with changes we desire but fear? The choice to give up an addiction, leave a bad situation, or even follow a dream. It's always easier to stay with the devil we know—often that is only our own self-imposed limitations—than to confront the angel who bears the message of truth about our selves and our destiny!

Jacob chooses to stay there in the struggle, wrestling with that angel he doesn't know, wrestling with his own worst tendencies, wrestling with repentance. The struggle leaves him with a wound in his hip socket and a lifelong limp. Transformation comes at a price. We're never quite the same, and it just might show. The angel demands that Jacob let him go, but Jacob hangs on. He demands a blessing. No trickery or deceit this time: he finally, boldly, faces the worst in himself and the power of divine force. He has not given in to fear or despair.

And then the unthinkable happens. Instead of a blessing, the angel gives him a *new name*. *Israel: he who has struggled with God*. He is transformed: from Jacob the usurper, into Israel, the one who stays in the struggle with the holy; Israel, parent of a nation. But this isn't enough for him—remember who the angel is dealing with! Jacob wants to know the *angel's* name. But as no one can know the true name of God, the angel refuses to reply. He does, however, give Jacob-Israel the blessing he craves. And Jacob-Israel knows very well *exactly* with whom he has been wrestling: the holy itself. "I saw God face to face," he says, "and yet my life was spared."

Inner transformation can *be* like seeing the face of God and living through it. This is one of the hardest things we face, and we can avoid it if we choose. We can feel we're being turned inside out by an inner truth that demands its due; or it may feel as if we are called to a new, strange place; or maybe both. But it never feels like a sure thing. We don't know how the struggle will turn out—what kind of limp we're going to wind up with, or what deep shift in our identity. Just as Jacob didn't know whether Esau would forgive him or kill him, we never know for sure what will happen as we move forward into our own changes. And that's why it would be easier to stay with our unsatisfactory job, our abusive relationship, our addiction that keeps us down but at least gives us an excuse for being down. We never know what new name we will receive, or how we will limp, how be transformed. But we do find, if we choose to face the angel, that the new name, the transformation, and the blessing are worth the struggle.

And what of the blessing? The story doesn't tell us what blessing the angel gives the new Israel. But think of what blessing you've found when you've stayed in your struggle. The addicted person who chooses to stay in the struggle with addiction learns a prayer that could benefit us all: *God*,

grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference. A tall order. Jacob has to accept what he cannot change: his past behavior, the tangled relations between his wives, the possibility that Esau won't forgive him; and the fact that he cannot know the name of God. He has to change what he can: his attitude toward Esau, greater honesty and equity in his work and relationships.

And what do St. Francis and the sow have to do with the Serenity Prayer and with Jacob's story? Just think of what Jacob has to accept about himself. It isn't pretty. And yet he is blessed, and chosen to be the forebear of a people. Amazing. How does that happen?

It isn't all up to Jacob, after all. It isn't all up to *us*. We can't create our lives and shape the world all by ourselves. We usually can't release a bad habit or situation *all* by ourselves. We have to stay with the struggle, yes; but we also have to know when to let go, accept help, accept ourselves for what we are, flawed creatures, no matter how much we want perfection. We have to, sooner or later, allow for grace. That's the meaning of the serenity prayer.

To be transformed, we have to know ourselves acceptable as we already are—and that is an amazing blessing. That's what St. Francis is doing in this poem. This large, thick pig, an animal not generally associated with loveliness—and the saint's hand on her brow. His blessing raising in her body and brain the memory of her own loveliness, fourteen baby piglets drinking life from their mother. The sow “remembering all down her thick length, from the earthen snout all the way through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of the tail.” The sow with her “great broken heart.” How deeply are our own hearts broken? How thick is our length of body and years, how earthen our snouts from rooting about in what is not worthy of us? How mired in fodder and slops our souls?

Touched by the saint, the sow is reminded of her “long, perfect loveliness” and “the spiritual curl of the tail.” Touched by the angel, Jacob is wounded, *and* he is reminded of his great task in life, *and* he is blessed. Touched by unexpected grace—the compassion of a stranger or friend, a memory, an extraordinary sunrise, words that speak to our lives—we are reminded and remember our “long, perfect loveliness,” our inherent worth and dignity, the truer meaning of our lives. All of us need at times to be retaught our loveliness. All of us, sometime, need the hand on the brow, blessing us, calling forth self-blessing, calling forth healing, inviting wholeness.

For inner transformation to occur, we have to stay in the struggle. And we have to let go and allow ourselves to be blessed by grace.

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