

Opening Address at The Gathering: South Africa

Transfiguration by Claude Nikondeha, Burundi.

We are, many of us, on a trajectory of transformation in our communities and countries. We are working for something more than the salvation of the soul, we are investing in the restoration of all things. All things – creation in its entirety, all things created in Heaven and on Earth – are being restored, reconciled, transformed into God’s dream for His world.

Desmond Tutu, a son of South Africa and a fitting mentor for us gathered here today, speaks of the Principle of Transfiguration. ‘Nothing, no one, and no situation is ‘untransfigurable,’ that the whole of Creation, nature, waits expectantly for its transfiguration... when it will be translucent with divine glory.’ We are collaborating with Christ as He works to bring the ultimate transfiguration of the world.

This image of transfiguration has really captured my imagination, so I submit it to you tonight for some corporate reflection. Transform – a familiar word among us – means to change something in its composition, structure, character or condition. This is our work as community organizers, right, to bring about such change on the ground. But transfiguration brings another set of connotations, it adds luminosity, enrichment, some sort of exaltation. Indeed, it means to give a new and exalted appearance, to bring about a change for the better. To transfigure seems to elevate the endeavor or to deepen it, maybe.

Let me share a story...

This past summer I traveled, for the first time, to a Batwa community just outside Bujumbura. I reached the village of Bubanza and saw people living in unbelievable conditions. People consigned to arid, sterile land far from a school or a local market. They were living in feeble grass huts that could not withstand the rains of Burundi. I sought out the leader of the village. I asked his name. I wanted to know who he was. He told me Nazina, ‘no name.’ In a culture where a name tells who you are or who you are to become, his parents named him No Name. There was nothing to hope for. His name communicated the depth of despondency that the Batwa people experience. In a moment I recognized their sense of frailty, their invisibility – seeing how precarious their life was. I also saw how my life is tied up with theirs. I am less human because of their condition. My own humanity and even faith is bound to their well-being. In that moment I knew my existence was bound to Nazina, No Name. My heart was pierced.

It was a moment of transfiguration. It was a moment when God allowed me to see something more truly and deeply.

The encounter with No Name changed my plans. There was a clarity about what I was to be doing... and it was in partnership with the Batwa people.

Moments of transfiguration set us on a trajectory of transformation toward the ultimate transfiguration of God’s beloved world.

Moments of transfiguration, if we are open to them, recognize them and lean into them, recruit us to be agents of transformation on the ground. That ground can be in Burundi among the Batwa people, in Pokot among warring tribes, in Gugulethu township among those still suffering injustice. Those moments of seeing truly ignite something in us and inform the reality on the ground.

I believe that those moments of transfiguration set us on a God-ordained course, but also whet our appetite for consummation, for the ultimate transfiguration of the world. I propose that we gathered here live between God-given moments of transfiguration and the ultimate transfiguration of all things.

Between the bookends of transfiguration we live out the work of transformation. Changing the conditions on the ground is our day to day charge.

- ~ fostering healthy conversation amid election season
- ~ searching out parcels of land for a community development project for the landless
- ~ comforting the HIV/AIDS victims in the nearby slum
- ~ facilitating reconciliation among those in the grip of long-standing ethnic hostilities
- ~ fighting the ignorance and fear that gives rise to xenophobia
- ~ digging wells in arid communities
- ~ extending compassion to the widows of war
- ~ nurturing and housing the orphans
- ~ dismantling unjust systems that keep people impoverished

The first time we gathered in Uganda we spoke of the Gospel of Transformation that eclipses the old Gospel of Evacuation. We are not merely about saving souls for Heaven so that we can escape this world, but we are engaged in the work of transformation here on earth in our communities. The Gospel of Jesus propels us into our communities to bring the liberating and transforming message of Jesus to those living on ground zero.

Last year we explored the ramifications of the Gospel of Reconciliation while in Rwanda. The work of reconciling, peace-making, forgiveness in places like Rwanda, Kenya, South Africa.... This is part of the gospel imperative entrusted to us by Jesus.

Our work on the ground *is* spiritual. Our spirituality is expressed in these concrete actions – comforting, facilitating, nurturing, digging, fostering, housing and feeding. Our spiritual lives are lived out as agents of transformation.

But our good works and good efforts need roots and nourishment to sustain us from moments of transfiguration to the ultimate transfiguration. To do the work of transformation without the accompanying spirituality is to run on empty.

As Africans we have been at this for a long time, haven't we? We have been working to change the conditions on the ground. And it would seem we have such a long way to go. We cannot afford to let our wells run dry.

What is 'the spirituality of transformation' (to borrow from Desmond Tutu yet again) that sustains us from beginning to glorious end? I think the African Reformation has to do with this very question. How have we been sustained thus far and how will we find nourishment in the season to come? Because the work is not done yet, we are still awaiting transfiguration, right? What are the spiritual resources that will fund our transforming endeavors? This is what I hope we will explore together in the next set of days. I hope our sessions will be centered on this question, I hope our dinner conversations will be about how we each experience sustenance while tilling transformation on the ground in our home communities.

Brian McLaren writes that 'spirituality' is 'a word that somehow captures the idea of a viable, sustainable, meaningful way of life.' I have heard people speak about spirituality as an ethereal quality of life or as a set of religious activities. But I love how Brian describes spirituality – as a way of

life. Viable: practical, workable, doable. Sustainable: nourishing for the long haul. Meaningful: rich with significance.

Cultivating a viable, sustainable and meaningful way of life as agents of transformation in God's world. How do we do that? How do African voices illumine this inquiry?

Desmond Tutu sketches out his own understanding of spirituality that is a good foundation for our discussions, I believe.

(1) The spirituality of transformation has a redemptive understanding of suffering.

It does not surprise me that an African elder would make this connection between suffering and spirituality. In Africa we have plenty of suffering, it is an unavoidable part of our landscape. We, as a continent, suffer ethnic injustice, food shortages, multiple health pandemics, lack of medical supplies, unfair trade agreements, land disputes, extreme poverty, and the sheer loss of life across Africa is a deep & perpetual suffering.

According to Tutu, this suffering can either embitter us or ennoble us. We have seen both results across the continent – bitterness that spawns genocide and the nobility of Mandela when he walked out of 27 years of prison with a spirit of forgiveness. But we have a choice to make when we encounter / endure suffering. Will we nurse the seeds of bitterness or die to those urges and resentments and instead cultivate nobility? Part of our spiritual tenor depends on how we choose to respond to the sufferings.

Tutu points out that the reason we can allow suffering to ennoble us is a matter of context. "When we are able to see the *larger purpose* of our suffering, it is transformed, transmuted. It becomes redemptive suffering." When we realize that we are working toward the ultimate transfiguration of the world, today's suffering is put in its place, in its rightful perspective. And we can suffer it, knowing it does not have the final word. The pain is transformed, redeemed and now somehow serviceable. It is part mystery, isn't it? Richard Rohr, a Catholic contemplative, adds that pain, if not transformed, will be transmitted. Think about that. If we do not allow our pain, our suffering to be transformed, it will be spread out to others or, in the very least, other parts of our own life. Think of all the untransformed pain and how it has spread – in genocide, xenophobia, rape, greed that deprives the poor. But when our pain is transformed it contributes to the healing of the world. So then how we decide to respond to the pain & suffering in our life is a very spiritual matter.

"It seems that in this universe redemption of any kind happens only through some form of suffering." Tutu concludes. Redemption : Suffering, Transfiguration : Pain, Resurrection : Cross.

I think a lot of us look to the west as a mentor in many ways. We look at their prosperity, democracy, innovations and educational institutions. Maybe we even look to their churches for an example, for some equipping or even funding. But I think we need to consider how our western friends manage their suffering. I don't think I am misrepresenting the truth when I say that most westerners work hard to avoid suffering at all costs and they have the resources to do it pretty well. A slight headache and they reach for an aspirin; a hard choice to be made and they distract themselves in front of the tv; a deep personal loss and they open the liquor cabinet or the refrigerator. Is this how we, in Africa, want to respond to suffering? Will this bring about a spiritual maturing that will contribute to the healing of the world? African and Western, we need to agree that facing our sufferings together might be the more wise choice, though it be a harder one.

Jesus told us to carry our cross, to follow in His footsteps into the inevitable suffering. And when I see the connection between suffering and redemption, it starts to make some strange sense. We follow in suffering, because we follow Him in redemption. They are connected. No cross, then no crown, it would seem. As we suffer, and allow that pain to be redeemed we contribute to the transfiguration of the world in some mystical way. We are partnering with Christ in the restoration of all things.

(2) The spirituality of transformation has *ubuntu* as the foundational understanding of persons.

‘We are set in a delicate network of interdependence with our fellow human beings and all of creation’ Tutu states. This is a foundational understanding for our humanity, as one connected to others. In Africa we call this *ubuntu*, We are persons *through* other persons. Our humanity is all bundled up together – yours, mine, those outside this camp, even those across the world. We are interconnected, and we are affected by the well-being of one another.

When someone is humiliated, I am humiliated.

When another is going to bed on an empty stomach, I am not satiated.

When you are broken-hearted, my joy cannot be complete.

I am diminished when you are not well. We are connected.

When I first visited the Batwa village of Bubanza, I was so stunned by the abject poverty of these people. Impermanent housing, so flimsy and unfit to endure the rains. A few potatoes in the pot, when there was a village of over 70 families to be fed. No access to schools, clean water or a local marketplace. I remember the deep, piercing awareness that I was less because Nazina’s family was living in such dire conditions. I felt personally diminished by their circumstances, because I knew our shared humanity connected us in an unavoidable way. I remember telling my wife I realized that my faith would mean nothing if I do not do something to change the situation on the ground in Bubanza. My very spirituality depended on the living conditions of the Batwa, on my connection to Nazina. That is *ubuntu*.

I recall Marius coming to the States and addressing a group of Americans. He told them that partnering with Africa, caring for the situation on the ground in Africa was vital to their well-being. Why? Because if Africans were not well, then Americans were not well either. The well-being of my American friends was dependant on and connected with the well-being of my brothers and sisters in Africa. Marius reminded us of our connection, *ubuntu*.

Now take this a step further... think about victims of genocide and the perpetrators of that same genocide. Even they are connected to one another, even they are diminished by the others suffering, ignorance and anger of the other. They are not only connected by the violent act, they are connected in their very humanity, in their vulnerability. All must be healed – victim, perpetrator, survivor, beneficiary. This is why Jesus insists on forgiveness, to restore all parties. To recognize the humanity in each one and call it out, to offer wholeness to each fractured soul.

Another stunning word from Desmond Tutu: ‘But if you are to be true partners with God in the transfiguration of His world and help bring this triumph of love over hatred... you must begin by understanding that as much as God loves you, God equally loves your enemies.’

When we accept the truth of *ubuntu* we realize that we are all connected, even we and our enemies. And God loves them as passionately as He loves us – we have this in common with those we hate, those who have hurt us, those who we think deserve our scorn. Even then, we

are connected. So our futures are intertwined. So Jesus tells us to love our enemies, pray for them... because He knows that our healing is connected to theirs. *Ubuntu*.

(3) The spirituality of transformation has a contemplative posture toward God.

By this, Tutu means that everyone is meant to have that space inside where they can hear God's voice. This requires regular stillness, quiet, time alone. This is a large part of how we cultivate the contemplative space where we can hear. So first there is the quiet. Next we lean in and listen – to the silence and then to the voice of God. We also pray – we converse with God.

Tending our unique and individual relationship with God provides nourishment for us as we engage in the community work to which we've been called. This constant conversation keeps our spirit supple before God, spiritually hydrated for the work.

Finding such stillness might be the most challenging thing for us as we go about our daily business in our communities. We are constantly fielding calls, making visits, running errands, keeping up with all the social obligations. We are in constant motion – it seems an occupational hazard for agents of transformation. It would be easy to convince ourselves that our action is more important than our stillness. We have to get the food and blankets to the refugee camp in Nakuru, we need to provide shelter-meals-safety for the foreigners at the Warehouse, I have to become a make-shift ambulance and get this mother and child to the clinic... It is important that we do these things. No doubt, no question. No time for stillness today.

I have often heard it said that there is no hurry in Africa... but some days there seems to be no rest in Africa, either! We are busy on the ground doing important things that matter to our communities. And yet, stillness is a resource we cannot forgo. I think this is a challenge for all community organizers... making space to be still and quiet. Leaning into the practice of listening to God. It might even seem counter-intuitive that stillness can fund motion, but it is true.

Richard Rohr observes that so much is happening in the world, in our communities, that cannot be fixed or explained. No amount of rushing, hurrying, driving, running will address all the challenges. However, they can be felt and suffered. And a contemplative person makes space for this, the contemplative agrees to feel and to suffer the pain of the world with Christ.

The time in stillness may find us alone with God, but often His concerns are corporate. So we feel as He does, which keeps our hearts tender and compassionate. And we stay close to the suffering... coming back to where we began, it would seem. The spirituality of transformation is a way of life that embraces suffering, knows it to be ultimately redemptive, and in stillness finds the resources to hold it until it is transfigured.

Matt 16 says, "From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!"

Peter, just moments earlier had been dubbed The Rock. Now he rebukes Jesus when it comes to the looming suffering. Never, Lord! Now remember, disciples were literally followers of their rabbi. They would follow their rabbi so closely that it wasn't uncommon for the dust from his feet to be all over

them by the end of the day. They did what he did. So imagine your rabbi telling you he was about to suffer, to die. Guess where you are headed? Now you understand part of Peter's passionate rebuke! He did not want to suffer or die, either. He and Jesus exchange some words. And we recall what Jesus tells the disciples at this point – If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. He tells them point blank that if they want to continue to follow him, they are headed into suffering.

“And six days later Jesus took with him Peter, James and John... high up on a mountain. There he was transfigured before them.” They saw Jesus truly, deeply. Peter wanted to build a tent, to tabernacle there, to rest there in the glory of that luminous mountain with Jesus and the others. Sounds nice, actually. But after a brief moment, Jesus sends them back down the mountain. Back to the previous trajectory of suffering. He sends them back into the world.

But this moment of transfiguration, where they see Jesus truly, fortifies them for what is to come. They will walk the suffering, witness the Cross and endure the perils of church planting, sustained by that moment of transfiguration. The moment of transfiguration reframed the coming suffering as redemptive.

Years later, as a seasoned pastor, Peter will refer to that moment saying, “we were eye witnesses to His majesty... we were with Him on the holy mountain.” All those years, that moment sustained him. You get the sense that many times, amid much hardship, he has held on to that moment. It sustained him as a transformer of the early church.