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## On the Power of Transformation and Becoming Human

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KEN FLORES

# On the Power of Transformation and Becoming Human

I consider myself bad at change, yet I believe in the power of transformation.

I have undergone many transformations in my life. I moved from a Japanese-speaking preschool to an English kindergarten at age 5. My parents divorced when I was 11. I moved from Japan to the US, alone, at 18. I came out as non-binary and gay at 19. Each time, there was a period of intense discomfort before a dramatic transformation in how I understood myself and more importantly, in how I saw others.

There is a natural human instinct to live in the moment. I often forget that I have had a storied past, and will likely have a storied future. We tend to see ourselves as monolithic, as though the current version of ourselves was always who we were and who we will always be.

“We tend to see ourselves as monolithic, as though the current version of ourselves was always who we were and who we will always be. This is false.”

This is false. All of us have undergone dramatic (and not-so-dramatic) changes throughout our lives. Literature

abounds with stories of transformation: the story of Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus, personal accounts of Born-again Christians; the archetypal hero’s journey ends with the hero transformed.

Of course, transformation doesn’t mean throwing *everything* out; it just means removing what is unnecessary, much like smelting metal from ore. Many of us have been hurt, and we have built trauma responses as armor against that pain. When we become free from the hurt, that armor can begin to get in the way of our lives and our relationships. It can be difficult and scary, but shedding that armor is an important part of the healing process.

Cultural and institutional reform is much the same. In any institution, there is something about it that holds good, or it would not survive. The work of reformation is discarding what has become no longer useful, while keeping that which still holds value.

Change is uncomfortable. Biologically, a change in our environment requires us to expend resources to adapt, and so we have evolved to shy away from anything that might cause change. That armor of personal inertia is the



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first obstacle to transformation. Here is where I am drawn to an idea I have encountered at Cal Lutheran about living with—and engaging—that discomfort; many people simply turn away from that discomfort, suppressing it in order to remain in the comfort of familiarity. But without engaging that discomfort, it becomes much harder to change for the better.

“The work of reformation is discarding what has become no longer useful, while keeping that which still holds value.”

And here I must add: not all change is a life-changing, revelatory experience. Most change is slow and unnoticed. It can be for the better, or for the worse. But that is also the most important kind of change, as it is the kind that shapes us the most. The question then becomes how we can shape that change to become closer to the people we want to be.

For me, forgiveness also begins with this belief. I have been hurt by many of the people in my life. But as long as I can see them working to improve themselves, then I can believe that the person they are becoming will be better than the person they were when they hurt me.

My thoughts have been shaped by a class I am taking on the criminal justice system; in society we see incarcerated people as criminals, and much of the system is built on the precept that they will *always* be criminals. We do not try to transform them for the better, or to reintegrate them back into society. In the class, we try to press into the question of what it means to be human, and whether the systems of society seek to *dehumanize* people. I think that our institutions should allow us to become *more* human—more empathetic and connected to each other, more knowledgeable and with agency to live our lives the way we want to.

If we all endeavor to become the most human that we can be, then the work of transformation that begins in each of us will be reflected in our institutions as well.

## CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The theme for *Intersections* in Fall 2024 is “Vocation: Educational Access—Lutheran Roots, Contemporary Practices,” related to our summer conference. We invite written or artistic pieces from any perspective within the university that amplifies the theme of the summer conference. Contributions are due September 15, 2024. If you would like to be in conversation about an idea that is brewing, please be in touch with the editor, Colleen Windham-Hughes: [windhamh@callutheran.edu](mailto:windhamh@callutheran.edu)

