Transformational Change: A Historical Review

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Recovery from alcoholism can occur through a process of psychological death and rebirth. Generating a new person within a body once occupied by another, transformational change (TC) stands as a life-defining experience demarcating before (old self) and after (new self). The TC experiences of 7 individuals (Handsome Lake, John Gough, Francis Murphy, Jerry McAuley, Bill Wilson, Marty Mann, and Malcolm X) are presented here. Their recoveries from addiction catalyzed larger abstinence-based mutual aid, advocacy, or religious/cultural revitalization movements. Psychotherapists are encouraged to respect the healing power of the TC experience, avoid aborting the TC experience via superficial amelioration of its more disquieting manifestations, interpret the TC experience in ways that solidify and sustain the change process, and help bridge the TC experience and the construction of a new identity and lifestyle. J Clin Psychol/In Session 60: 461–470, 2004.

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Some experiences measured in moments can forever rend a life into the temporal categories of before and after and leave in their psychological wake an essentially new person. The evidence of such transformation exists in radical and sustained alterations of character, identity, and interpersonal relationships. Transformational change (TC) experiences constitute the most dramatic but least understood mechanism of human change, making it difficult for psychotherapists to recognize, understand, and respond to such experiences. Transformational change experiences have added historical import due to their propensity to catalyze larger religious, social, and therapeutic movements.

The link between transformational change of the individual and the rise of larger social movements has a long history, particularly within the religious arena. The lives of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, St. Augustine, Mohammed, Buddha, Luther, and Wesley illustrate how agonizing personal conflict can be resolved through sudden, life-transforming,

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and history-shaping experiences. Of all such historical accounts, it is on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus where Saul of Tarsus, the orthodox Jew and Christian persecutor, is transformed into St. Paul, the Christian missionary, that one finds the core elements of the TC experience: a germinating personal crisis; a breakdown and breakthrough experience; and a radically and positively altered identity and life course.

Seven TC Examples

Clinical interest in transformational change stems from its potential healing effects. The therapeutic power of the TC experience and the ability of such experiences to spawn therapeutic movements are illustrated vividly in the history of addiction recovery. In this article, I will analyze the TC experiences of seven individuals whose recoveries from addiction spawned larger mutual aid, advocacy, or cultural revitalization movements. Individuals chosen met three criteria:

1. they suffered from severe and persistent alcohol or other drug-related problems;
2. they resolved these problems through a brief experience that was unplanned and intense, and whose effects were positive and enduring; and
3. they went on to lead an abstinence-based mutual aid, advocacy, or religious/cultural revitalization movement.

Our seven subjects are as follows.

Handsome Lake (Ganioda'yo) (1735–1815) was a Seneca Indian who suffered from years of drunkenness. He was thought to have died in 1799, but awoke during preparation for his burial announcing that the Great Spirit had visited him in his death and sent him back to life with a message for Indian people. For the next 16 years, he remained sober and promulgated what came to be known as the Code of Handsome Lake (Longhouse Religion). This religious and cultural revitalization movement, through its moral code and regular meetings ("circles"), created an effective cultural framework for alcoholism recovery that continues to be practiced among some Native tribes today (Parker, 1913).

John Gough (1817–1886) lived a debauched life until a stranger, seeing Gough's drunken and forlorn state, stopped and befriended him on the street. The stranger's expressions of kindness and hope marked an emotional turning point in Gough's life. He signed the pledge and went on to become a leader of the Washingtonian movement of the early 1840s, bringing thousands into recovery through his charismatic speeches (more than 8000 in America and Europe), personal consultations, and prolific correspondence (Gough, 1870).

Francis Murphy (1836–1907) was in jail for drunkenness in 1871 when a missionary's words touched his heart and led to his conversion and recovery. Murphy founded the Blue Ribbon Reform Club Movement that brought thousands of alcoholics into recovery throughout New England and the Midwest (Daniels, 1877).

Jerry McAuley (1839–1884), a notorious alcoholic within the criminal underworld of New York City, underwent a series of powerful conversion experiences during and following his incarceration in Sing Sing Prison. McAuley achieved sobriety and in 1872 founded an institution (the Water Street Mission) that pioneered evangelical outreach to the drunkard and inspired the growth of urban rescue missions and rural inebriate colonies throughout the United States (Offord, 1885).

Bill Wilson (1895–1971) reached a point of desperation in 1934 while hospitalized for the fourth time for alcohol detoxification. After he cried, "If there is a God, let Him show Himself!", the room became ablaze with light and Wilson was overwhelmed by a

Presence and a vision of being at the summit of a mountain where a spirit wind blew through him, leaving the thought, "You are a free man." Wilson never took another drink and went on to co-found Alcoholics Anonymous, a mutual-aid society whose worldwide membership now exceeds two million (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1984).

Marty Mann (1904–1980) was undergoing treatment for alcoholism when an incident occurred that enraged her. While in this state, her eyes fell upon an opened prepublication copy of the book, *Alcoholics Anonymous, w*here she saw the words "We cannot live with anger." The next thing Mann recalls is being on her knees crying and praying. She arose knowing she was a different person, that she was "totally and completely free." She became the first women to recover successfully within Alcoholics Anonymous, and, in 1944, founded the National Committee for Education on Alcoholism. Mann became a central figure in the modern alcoholism movement and one of America's most successful public-health reformers (Brown & Brown, 2001).

Malcolm X (1925–1965) was an addicted street hustler who, following his religious conversion, became the driving force behind the dramatic growth of the Nation of Islam during the 1950s and early 1960s. His transforming moment occurred in a prison cell via a vision of W. D. Fard, the deceased messiah of the Nation of Islam. Through the example and influence of Malcolm X, the Nation of Islam became a cultural pathway of addiction recovery for many African-American men (Malcolm X & Haley, 1964; Myers, 1993).

A considerable body of literature helps analyze the experiences of these seven individuals and explore their clinical significance. This literature includes published accounts of their lives, as well as the early psychological studies of religious conversion by Edwin Starbuck and William James; the studies by Harold Begbie and Harriet Monroe of "twice-born men" (the conversion of alcoholics in rescue missions); Harry Tiebout's psychiatric studies on the role of surrender in recovery from alcoholism; and the more contemporary studies of James Loder and William Miller and Janet C'de Baca.

Characteristics of TC Individuals

Do those who recover from addiction through a TC experience differ from those whose recoveries are marked by more typical, incremental processes of change? Might the TC experience simply be a leap into health by individuals with low problem severity, high recovery resources, and a pre-existing affinity for spiritual or religious experience? This latter question has not been answered definitively within the research on transformational change, but no such pattern exists in our sample. Before their TC experience, accounts of these seven lives are filled with reports of acute withdrawal, delirium tremens, fear of insanity, occupational instability, institutionalization, family alienation, and social ostracism. Pledges of abstinence by our subjects were broken repeatedly, and all prior professional interventions had failed. Wilson and Mann had more than 10 alcohol-related treatments between them. Three of the seven cases had criminal histories ranging from murder (Murphy) and highway robbery (McAuley) to drug dealing, pandering, and burglary (Malcolm X). As a group, they were mostly self-proclaimed atheists, with one (Malcolm X) so hostile towards religion that he was referred to as "Satan" by his fellow prison inmates. None of the seven individuals profiled would have been judged a likely candidate to achieve prolonged sobriety or to become the leader of a history-shaping social movement.

The Context of Transformational Change

The TC experience is so intensely personal that the larger contexts in which these experiences unfold easily can be overlooked. The personal unrest of our subjects was mirrored

by great social unrest within their cultural environments. Handsome Lake experienced his crisis of change at a time when Native tribes were under physical and cultural assault. The collapse of the stock market and the Great Depression sorely tested the "I am the master of my fate" mantra of Bill Wilson's generation. Malcolm X's transformation unfolded during the rise of black consciousness and the birth of the civil-rights movement. Transformational change experiences often occur within a larger context of political, economic, or social unrest when traditional ideas and sources of support are collapsing.

The developmental timing of the recovery-inducing TC experience varies widely, but seems to differ from that of most religious conversions. Starbuck (1901), in his classic study of religious conversion, noted that such experiences most often occur between early and mid-adolescence and only rarely occur after age 20. In contrast, the seven TC experiences noted here occurred much later in life, ranging from age 25 (Gough) to 64 (Handsome Lake). There is a potentially significant confluence of location: isolation-induced introspection seems a common pre-condition for the TC experience. Five of our seven cases underwent their breakthrough experience while institutionalized—three in a jail cell (Murphy, McAuley, and Malcolm X) and two while alone in a hospital or sanatoria (Wilson and Mann).

Types and Characteristics of Transformational Change

There have been many efforts to catalogue religious and secular varieties of TC experiences. Starbuck and James noted two types: a volitional type in which the change is gradual and consciously directed, and a self-surrender type, which is rapidly climactic and whose direction seems to come from outside the self. Miller and C'de Baca (2001) also found two types: an insightful type (breakthrough of internal awareness) and a mystical type (sense of being acting upon by an outside force). Of the seven individuals profiled, Gough's TC experience is the most distinctly secular and closest to the insightful form of TC experience.

It has yet to be determined whether the TC experience is a "rapidization of change" (Oates, 1978) or is a qualitatively different process. Bill Wilson (1988) argued that his experience was just the extreme condensation of the endless small steps more typically taken by AA members who successfully recovery from alcoholism. Others, such as Malcolm X, rarely spoke of their TC experience, perhaps in an effort to minimize the differences between themselves and their followers.

Transformational change experiences suggest five distinct characteristics. First, the TC experience is sudden, unplanned, and unanticipated. The subject is more a recipient of the experience than an initiator or director of it. This does not mean that the subject is a complete bystander of the TC experience. Pasquier (1978) described a point in the TC experience in which the subject is free to retreat from the experience or move forward through the experience. This movement through resistance into a letting go and embrace of the TC experience has been characterized as a "passage" or "surrender."

Second, TC experiences are extremely vivid, allowing TC individuals to recount their experiences in extreme detail. Some of the more vivid dimensions include:

- desperate entreaties for help (Wilson's plea, "If there be a God, let him show Himself!") (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1984, p. 121);
- death-like trances and rebirths (Handsome Lake's death and awakening);
- rooms lighting up (Murphy, McAuley, and Wilson);
- vivid smells (McAuley's report of the fragrance of sweet flowers);

- felt presence of spiritual beings (Wilson's awed proclamation, "This must be the great reality. The God of the preachers.") (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1984, p. 121);
- visions and spiritual encounters (Handsome Lake, Malcolm X);
- voices (McAuley hearing, "My son, thy sins, which are many, are forgiven." (Offord, 1885, p. 19);
- rapid heartbeat, profuse sweating, weeping (McAuley, Mann);
- profound breakthroughs of awareness and understanding;
- a flooding sense of love, hope, and well-being (Gough and Wilson);
- a sense of newness, joy, ecstasy, and release (Wilson's experience of the words, "You are a free man"; Mann's recognition that she was "totally and completely free!");
- physical touch (McAuley's report: ". . . in the very height of my distress, it seemed as if a hand was laid upon my head . . .") (Offord, 1885, p. 19);
- physical prostration (near-universal reports of being literally brought to one's knees);
- extreme disorientation (McAuley, "I did not know if I was living or not . . .") (Offord, 1885, p. 19).

Third, the effects of TC are comprehensive. In his 1909 study of conversion-induced recovery from alcoholism, Begbie (1909) emphasized that these conversions represented not a change in behavior (the absence of drinking), but a revolution in character. The change experiences noted in our case studies reflect more than changes of appearance or habits of living; they involve profound change in the very architecture of personal identity. The obliteration of longstanding and excessive appetites for intoxicants is a side effect rather than the essence of the TC experience. This change is so total that the TC experience across time and cultural traditions has been marked by a three-part personal narrative: who I was, what happened, and who I am today.

Studies of TC experiences do note the potential for partial or incomplete transformations. Tiebout (1953) observed that some alcoholics experience only a transient or intellectual experience of surrender that removes (sometimes forever) the consumption of alcohol, but leaves in its wake a distinctly immature person whose personality defects continue unchecked. Tiebout distinguished this skin-deep compliance from the internal experience of surrender. In Tiebout's view, the former produces a "selective surrender" to alcohol, but not a broader surrender to life.

Fourth, the changes elicited by the TC experience are positive. This is such a prominent feature of the TC experience that some investigators (Miller & C'de Baca, 2001) have incorporated this dimension of positiveness into the very definition of TC. While the positive fruits of TC are clear in our seven cases, other investigators have cautioned that this is not always the case. Salzman (1954), for example, noted that the TC experience may be either progressive (maturational) or regressive (psychopathological). The former is characterized by honesty, humility, tolerance, and generosity, whereas the latter is characterized by rigidity of belief, zealous proselytizing, intolerance or hatred of infidels, and propensity for aggression and martyrdom.

Fifth, the TC experience, while brief, is enduring in its effects. Most of the cases had a single TC experience that lasted from a few minutes to several hours. Others had a series of TC experiences, each more intense than the one that preceded it. Handsome Lake, Wilson, and Mann typify the single, unforgettable TC experience, while Gough and McAuley typify those who report multiple conversions and re-commitments. In terms of the ability of the TC experience to suppress drinking, five of the eight individuals profiled never drank again after their TC experience. Gough and McAuley experienced several

early relapses before achieving permanent sobriety, and Mann experienced three brief relapses in 1939–1940 and one brief relapse two decades later. Where relapse did occur, it was more a brief fluctuation of commitment rather than a permanent abandonment of faith or a reversal of the changes of character that were the product of the TC experience.

Stages of Transformational Change

In spite of their unintentionality and suddenness, TC experiences are built upon a personal history and often constitute a critical detonation point of past experience (Loder, 1989). The process of moving toward this detonation point has been characterized by James (1902/1985) as one of "organic ripening." Clark (1958) described three stages of the entire process: unrest and conflict (feelings of unworthiness, shame, and incompleteness), the "conversion crisis" (sudden breakthrough of illumination), and a sense of "peace, release, and inner harmony." Loder (1989) noted five similar stages in what he called the "logic of transformation": conflict (a dissonance in the soul), interlude for scanning (search for a resolution), intuitive insight (breakthrough experience of truth), release and openness for new patterns of thinking and being, and interpretation and verification (experience is filtered through significant others for validation). Both models closely reflect the TC experiences under investigation.

The seven cases detailed here share five elements:

1. a period of isolation and traumatic discontent,
2. exposure to a message/messenger of hope,
3. a breakthrough experience,
4. validation of the experience, and
5. entrance into a community of shared experience.

Isolation and Traumatic Discontent

The problems of our subjects worsened before their TC experiences, and their psychological defenses became exaggerated, perhaps in an effort to sustain their historical identity and head off the coming crisis. Estranged from family and friends, they found themselves without an avenue of escape. Murphy's oldest friend not only failed to bail him out of jail, but also recommended that he be locked up. Wilson overheard his wife and doctor discussing the potential need for his legal commitment. In this period of heightened introspection, our subjects found themselves experiencing the germinating emotions of the TC experience: imperfection, sinfulness, wretchedness, incompleteness, restlessness, fear, estrangement, depression, and desperation (Starbuck, 1901).

In the absence of defensive filters and distortions, the idealized self was shattered and the degradation of the real self was revealed in its loathsome details. Wilson described his deep depression at this moment as a "terrifying darkness" and an "agony of the spirit" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1984, p. 120). Such acute emotional pain typified Begbie's (1909, p. 54) descriptions of the conversion crisis of the alcoholic: "A wave of shame swept over him; he came out of his vision with this sense of horror and shame drenching his thought. For the first time in all his life he was stunned be realization of his degradation and infamy. He knew himself." This initial stage of the TC experience has a destructive dimension involving the collapse of the former self and its defensive armor.

Exposure to a Message/Messenger of Hope

During these darkest hours, our subjects were provided through word or relationship a hope that their stained identities could be cleansed. This hope came from varied sources: the words of the Great Spirit to Handsome Lake, the kindness of a befriending stranger to Gough, the encouragement of a converted prize fighter to McAuley, the visit of Captain Cyrus Sturdevant to Murphy's jail cell, Ebby T.'s visit to Bill W., Dr. Tiebout's gift of a copy of Alcoholics Anonymous to Marty Mann, and letters from his brother Reginald to Malcolm X. Each of our subjects encountered a messenger and a message of hope.

A Breakthrough Experience

The core elements of the experience of TC seem remarkably consistent across time and culture. These elements include the experiences of surrender, confession, forgiveness, awe, connectedness, ecstasy, release, newness, and tranquility. There is a perception of truth, a reconciliation of conflicting ideas and emotions, and a new sense of order and beauty so complete as to form a passage from one identity to another.

Validation of the Experience

To state that the TC experience is vivid and permanent does not mean that the experience is accepted without question. Most such experiences require interpretation and validation. Two incidents vividly portray the importance of such validation. Bill Wilson and Marty Mann questioned the genuineness of their TC experiences. Both shared the details of their TC experience with their physicians—William Silkworth and Harry Tiebout, respectively—and pointedly asked if they were losing their minds. Silkworth and Tiebout labeled the experiences in spiritual rather than medical terms and encouraged their patients to "hang on" to this experience. Wilson received further validation when he found his experience described in William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* and by the expressed confidence of his wife ("From that moment on, I shared his confidence in the future.") (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1984, p. 125).

Entrance into a Community of Shared Experience

Loder (1989) observed that the "convictional experience" is incomplete until there is a social context within which it can be validated and sustained among those who have shared the experience. Efforts to create or to enter a community of shared experience were evident in our case studies. This need to share "experience, strength, and hope" constitutes the bridge through which the highly personal TC experience shifts to the communal and the historical, moving across generational, geographical, religious, and cultural boundaries.

TC and Therapeutic Social Movements

Within the TC experience, there often is an intense need to "testify" and offer "witness" about one's experience and new understandings. This serves multiple needs: it provides a way to relive, sustain, and celebrate the experience; it reaffirms the behavioral commitments that came out of the experience; and it provides a vehicle to reach out to others. The zeal with which our protagonists promoted their new beliefs was intense and sustained.

All seven of the individuals spent the remainder of their lives promoting the new values that grew out of their TC experiences. Of the seven people we profiled, two (Gough and Murphy) left an extensive body of reflections, but no codified map for change; two left oral teachings that later were codified by their followers (Handsome Lake, McAuley); and three detailed the active ingredients of their therapeutic/activist programs. The latter include Wilson's Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, Mann's five kinetic ideas of the National Committee for Education on Alcoholism, and Malcom X's six-point process for addiction recovery for the Nation of Islam.

What these codified experiences shared in common was a rationale for abstinence from alcohol and other drugs, a framework of sustained mutual support, a moral code of living that defined sobriety as more than the absence of drinking, and a call to reach out to other lost souls. The service ethic is present throughout, from the Washingtonian mantra, "You've been saved, now save another" to what Malcolm X referred to as "fishing for the dead" (Myers, 1993, p. 82).

There are distinct differences in the teachings of Handsome Lake and Malcom X when compared to the teachings of other TC individuals, with the former more focused on communal than individual experience. All were preoccupied with power and control but found different answers to how these issues related to sobriety. Gough, Murphy, McAuley, Wilson, and Mann saw their salvation rooted in the abdication of power—in the act of surrender. In contrast, Handsome Lake and Malcolm X portrayed alcohol and other drugs as poisons that robbed their communities of life and vitality. They called for the assertion of power to expel these poisons and to tap cultural roots to purge the shame and self-hatred that rendered such poisons a welcomed balm.

Clinical Implications

With full awareness that TC experiences that trigger larger social movements may not be representative of the broader pool of such experiences, I would offer five concluding recommendations for the clinical practitioner.

1. Sacred and secular varieties of transformational change represent legitimate ways in which individuals can profoundly, positively, and permanently redefine their personal identities and interpersonal relationships. These experiences offer evidence that the trajectory of the most incorrigible lives can be altered fundamentally.
2. The therapist can set the stage for TC by creating a psychological sanctuary conducive to self-evaluation, encouraging periods of isolation and heightening dissonance between the idealized and real self.
3. When intervening with an individual who may be in the midst of a TC experience, great care should be taken in prematurely aborting this experience via interventions aimed at alleviating its discomforting aspects. As William James (1902/1985, p. 187) noted, "When the new centre of personal energy has been subconsciously incubated so long as to be just ready to open into flower, 'hands off' is the only word for us, it must burst forth unaided!" The TC experience has its own momentum and direction that should not be altered.
4. Psychotherapists can validate and interpret TC experiences in ways that solidify and sustain the change process. It is best to avoid framing visions and messianic callings in terms of psychopathology (e.g., hallucinations, delusions) until the sources and fruits of such experiences are clear. As these case studies indicate, symptoms of acute psychopathology also can signal a process of positive

self-transformation and the beginnings of a movement that could touch hundreds of thousands of lives. It gives one pause to think that if William Silkworth had interpreted Bill Wilson's breakthrough experience in medical rather than spiritual terms, Alcoholics Anonymous might never have been born. Therapists can help clients gain passage through the TC experience by acknowledging the healing power of these events, assuaging fears of insanity, and helping the client stay within the experience. Doctors Silkworth and Tiebout provide admirable role models of this "being with" process.

5. Professional helpers have much to offer in the transition between the climactic TC experience and the consolidation of those changes into a new identity and lifestyle. One role is to help the individual construct a new narrative that guides how he/she relates to self and to others. There also are a variety of residual problems that remain following a TC experience that may call for professional assistance. The therapy provided by Harry Tiebout and Frances Weekes during the 1940s for Bill Wilson's bouts of depression illustrates the potential value of such assistance.

Processes of incremental and processes of transformational change may be analogous in terms of their long-term personal effects, but it is clear from this review that TC experiences have played important roles in the rise of therapeutic social movements. Charisma may be a lasting legacy of the TC experience and may explain why this atypical TC experience is overrepresented among leaders of recovery mutual aid and advocacy movements in the US. Therapists who respect the healing power of the TC experience can play supportive roles in such experiences and the movements that grow out of them.

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