

The Bittersweet Pursuit of Transformation

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EDITORIAL

THE BITTERSWEET PURSUIT OF TRANSFORMATION

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As far back as I can remember, I've had a deep longing for transformation. Growing up, I always felt too poor, too religious, and too odd to fit in. And I desperately wanted to fit in. Over time, this evolved into wanting a clear sense of purpose. I remember as a physical therapy student, longing for some sort of life-changing catastrophe. *If only I had a spinal injury*, I thought, *then surely fulfilling the minutia of daily life would become a worthy, heroic undertaking*. As of late, the focal point of my longing has rested upon my relationship with fear. I am so tired of being afraid. Afraid of failing, afraid of how others think of me, afraid of wasting my potential.

Despite this perpetual longing, I'm slowly realizing that I have no idea *how* I change. The processes underlying transformation remain a mystery to me. The archetypes from my Christian upbringing reinforce this mystery. Resurrection, conversion, salvation – these transformations seem to involve a type of magic that leaves me blind to their mechanisms. I'm also starting to realize that they have distorted my view of transformation, which has focused on the need for a singular, life-defining change.

One of my favorite movies focuses on this type of transformation. *Adaptation* is a pseudo-autobiographical film that sets up the screenwriter's fractured selves as identical twin brothers.[1] One, an artistic genius that is socially awkward and crippled by self-doubt. The other, an affable buffoon that is confident and charismatic, but constantly underachieving. The film culminates with a surreal scene that transforms these

two broken personas into a cohesive whole – one enlightened brother emerges, having integrated his twin’s virtues, while shedding their collective vices. I love this picture of transformation. It fuels my perpetual longing for change. *If only I could stop being afraid – I would finally become the person I was always meant to be.*

And, yet, clinging to this romanticized image, seems to blind me to the important change that I have experienced. My life changes pale in comparison to these dramatic prototypes. However, in my quieter moments, I see that, slowly – and in a decidedly non-linear way – there has been an arc of transformation in my life. Striving, stumbling, winning, loosing, slowly becoming. The trajectory of my career provides, perhaps, the most explicit testament to this change. After training and practicing as a physical therapist, I switched fields to earn a PhD in experimental psychology. I was keen to explore mind-body connections in the context of chronic pain rehabilitation. Since first joining faculty as a university professor eight years ago, I’ve slowly reoriented my research, focusing on new themes of suffering and selfhood. My work today only tangentially interfaces with where my career started some twenty years ago. Looking back, each step in this trajectory seems to have helped me understand and cultivate my idiosyncratic passions and gifts; allowing me to slowly re-orient my work to these inner bearings.

Navigating these vocational changes, however, has been a murky and fraught process – I have difficulty pinpointing any particularly transformative events and agonized over each minor decision. I think part of my longing for grand, life-altering, change, is wanting an experience so dramatic that it will be obvious that a transformation has occurred. I want to see it. I want others to see it. I don’t want there to be any doubt.

Longing for this type of grand transformation also seems to shield me from the inherent messiness of mindfully living through change. I put a lot of value in cultivating joy and happiness in my daily life. A constantly evolving daily practice aims to help me feel centered, mindful and present. At face value, longing for transformation is fundamentally incongruous with a deep sense of peace and acceptance in the present moment. Thinking of transformation as a singular, magical event helps protect my inner equanimity from the things about myself that I’m just not ready to accept. It’s as if my vision for change is that one day, I’m a peaceful Zen master, and then – *Poof!* – the next day, I’m a totally different, peaceful Zen master. Transformation complete.

In recent months, I’ve started to cultivate a new vision. Susan Cain’s book, *Bittersweet* has helped me with this process.[2] The book beautifully captures the intermixing of joy and sorrow that often characterize experiences of longing. It helped me recognize and embrace the incongruity of finding peace and joy in the present moment, while simultaneously wanting something else. It’s also helped me find more evidence of change in my everyday life.

And, so, I'm choosing to see my new leadership role with this journal as a type of transformation. I see this journal as an important vehicle for bridging the inner and professional lives of healthcare researchers, educators, and clinicians. But bridging this gulf in my own life is still quite new to me – I can count on one hand my published manuscripts that use the first-person. Working on this issue (my first as Editor) has been such an educational, rewarding and – as I'm slowly starting to see – transformative experience for me. Each of the contributions illustrates, in such different ways, what transformation in healthcare can look like. They have helped me cultivate new insights into my own personal and professional changes. My hope is that they will similarly inspire you – prompting new ways of understanding and aligning your ever-evolving inner and professional worlds. ■

REFERENCES

1. Jonze S. *Adaptation* [film]. United States: Columbia Pictures; 2002.
2. Cain S. *Bittersweet: How sorrow and longing make us whole*. United States: Crown Publishing Group; 2022.

Biographical note

Timothy Wideman is a physical therapist and associate professor at McGill University. His research aims to help clinicians better understand and address suffering associated with pain, and to improve how future health professionals are trained to care for people living with pain. He started serving as Editor-in-Chief at the beginning of 2023.