

TRANSFORMATIONAL PRINCIPLE

A heart change comes before social change.

Visiting the memorial site of a mass grave outside Kigali was a sobering experience. As I observed row after row of skulls, many deeply scarred by machete blades, my travelling companion looked at me with hollow eyes and asked, “Could this possibly happen to us?” The story of Rwanda alarms me. I wonder how many Rwandans found themselves huddled over a dead body, machete in hand, stunned by what had just occurred. This has all happened before. I’m sure that after World War II, there were bewildered Nazis, overwhelmed for the same reasons.

The problem is that apologizing for destructive actions is not the norm. It’s far more common to try to justify such actions. And if justification is impossible, then denial often follows—claiming ignorance or attempting to hide the truth. A friend in Burundi once said, “I fear for Rwanda. They’re determined to sweep the racial problems under the carpet by ignoring them.” The image I have is of the little Dutch boy plugging the leaking dike with his finger, needing more fingers to stop the flow. What happens when there are no more fingers?

A single finger is not enough to fix a leaking dike. The dike needs restoration. Restoration is necessary because things are not as they should be. It is a good thing that tales of restoration surround us. These stories, often retold in various forms—like the legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, Joan of Arc, or the Lord of the Rings—share a common theme: the immense joy that fills a kingdom when, after a long struggle, restoration finally arrives. Everyone lives happily ever after.

Like a fairy tale, I yearn for restoration, but I feel frustrated because it always seems to be just out of reach. A new government might bring hope for restoration, yet when the new leaders take office, they often face the same challenges as the previous administration. A marriage ceremony can symbolize hope for restoration, but it frequently falters when reality sets in. This is why I find solace in escaping the real world to immerse myself in legendary tales.

The ironic truth about restoration is that it cannot be achieved through brute force. It does not come from a strong, charismatic leader who pushes their way to the top. It cannot be won through

conflict; instead, it emerges when someone recognizes that something is wrong. Whether one is rich or poor, powerful or oppressed, restoration begins with humility.

He sat down and summoned the Twelve. “So you want first place? Then take the last place. Be the servant of all.”¹

Restoration requires the leaders in the community—the ones who hold the highest positions—to humbly admit their imperfections, just as everyone else should. A true leader takes the last place in line, offers to carry an employee’s briefcase, and spends time with those who can give nothing in return.

My father worked in Congo in the 1970s, providing technical expertise for a well-digging project in a village. At one point, nobody was willing to help unless they were paid. The project was on the verge of failure when a village leader finally stepped forward, grabbed a shovel, and started digging right there. He understood that, as a leader, it was his responsibility to do the heavy lifting. This action transformed the situation, and soon the entire community began to participate.

The greatest point of transformational leverage is transformed people...People, not money or programs, transform their worlds.²

The Transformation Principle starts by acknowledging that the solutions to a community’s problems come from within, not from external sources. Community members must recognize their true nature: they are wonderfully creative, profoundly worthy, and fully capable of enacting change.

However, the Transformation Principle also highlights that restoring a community comes at a cost. It requires sacrifice, beginning with the leader who must take on the role of a servant. It also necessitates repentance, as a leader must humbly admit when they are wrong. Sacrifice and repentance are not weaknesses; they are the foundation of a community that sees itself as capable of embodying positive change.

¹ Mark 9:35 The Message

² Bryant Myers, *Walking With the Poor*, p116. Myers goes on to say, “The fulcrum for transformational change is no longer transferring resources or building capacity or increasing choices, as important as these things are. But these things count only if they take place in a way that allows the poor to recover their true identity and discover the vocation God intends for them... A flawed process can make the poor poorer by further devaluing their view of themselves and what they have.”

Finally, the Transformation Principle asserts that when a leader takes the first humble and sacrificial step as a servant, others in the community are likely to follow, leading to changed attitudes. What was once considered a burden for the community can then become a seed for transformation.

Summary Statement:

We must heal ourselves before we can heal others. Restoration leads to transformation, freeing us to become agents of reconciliation.

Discussion:

1. Jesus said it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God. What does Jesus mean by this? How does this message apply to a transformed community?
2. Parents typically sacrifice for their children. This is a metaphor for a leader who unconditionally takes on challenging responsibilities. Can you recall a time in your life or community when someone in a position of privilege intentionally put themselves last? What was the outcome? Did it lead to positive change?
3. Think about the leaders in your life. Make a list of those you would like to emulate. What qualities do they possess that you admire? Where do you believe these leaders derive their sense of identity?
4. Restoring a piece of furniture involves sanding, nailing, and painting; it requires effort, time, and financial resources. How could this metaphor of restoration apply to aspects of your community that need revitalization?