

Defining Moments: Toward a Comprehensive Theory of Personal Transformation

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Since ancient times, transformation has been viewed as an evolutionary process within consciousness whereby one sees the world in a new way (Ferguson, 1980). However, lives can be transformed in an instant, often under tragic circumstances. For example, consider the tragedy at Sandy Hook. The world is still mourning the victims of the recent massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newton, Connecticut. Robbie Parker, father of six-year-old victim Emily Parker, spoke Portuguese with his daughter the morning of the incident, gave her a kiss, told her that he loved her, and walked out of the door wishing her a great day at school. Never would he have imagined that hours later a twenty year old boy would take the life of his own mother; moreover, go to an elementary school and perform the same hideous crime on twenty students, six adults, and himself. In that moment, lives were forever changed and transformed.

Whether viewed as an evolutionary process or an instantaneous event, personal transformation is preceded by a disorienting dilemma that disrupts the order of one's life (Ferguson, 1980). Although Robbie Parker and his family were victims to the terrible incident at Sandy Hook Elementary, the most profound action I remember observing on CNN was watching Robbie speak during a news conference about his little girl and all that she had done for the family during her short life. He shared how blessed he and his family were to have her here on earth for the time that they were given. He went on to talk about everything she did to help her little sisters and how they always went to her for comfort. Although it was very brave for Robbie to come out and speak on behalf of his family, these would be words that you would expect a mourning parent to say. However, when he ended his remarks by sharing that his heart and prayers went out to the shooter's family, and his goal was to make something positive out of a catastrophic situation; the media and the world did not know how to react to such an act of kindness. How did Robbie find the humility, calmness, and where-with-all to speak at a news conference within one day after the tragedy? The shooting incident was definitely a disorienting dilemma, which poses the question, "Was this a defining moment towards a personal transformation, or "state of being conscious of one's consciousness" for Robbie (Ferguson 1980, p. 68)?

The purpose of this examination is to explore the definition of personal transformation, the defining moment toward a personal transformation, stages of personal transformation, potential tools to assist a person going through a personal transformation, and a suggested approach to continue exploring this concept. The summary and conclusions offered were reached by reviewing multiple interviews from experts and novices in the industry. Scholarly articles and books, both classics and current research, were also reviewed to support the findings and conclusions.

Personal Transformation Defined

Through research, the word personal transformation has been described through several different terms such as perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991), transformative world view (Smith 1984), transformative logic (Loder, 1981), transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) and transformational change (White, 2004). The theorist's definitions of the terms were very similar in nature.

Dr. Gail Wade from Widener University defines personal transformation as a "multidimensional concept, a dynamic, uniquely individualized process of expanding consciousness whereby an individual becomes critically aware of old and new self-views and chooses to integrate these views into a new self-definition" (1998, p.713).

This definition was derived during Wade's research on using a modified version of Walker and Avant's concept analysis model coupled with integrating common themes from definitions of several disciplines of Margaret Newman's Theory of Health as Expanding Consciousness.(Wade, 1998, p. 713).

Jack Mezirow defines perspective transformation from the viewpoint that “learners are able to reflect critically on the underlying premises of their understanding” (Mezirow, 1991). Pizzi’s outlook is that personal transformation “provides a foundation for development of honest, authentic, and caring relationships” (1990). Other theorists shared the same sentiment stating, “For transformation to occur, an environment conducive to self-reflection is required” (Boyd, 1991).

As stated earlier, a litmus test was done with four participants to see how their answers would align with the history. All participants live in North Carolina and reported their age, occupation, gender, ethnicity, and answered a series of questions electronically. Demographic information was reported by the participants, is presented in Table 1. When asked the question around their definition of personal transformation, I was amazed to get similar responses from the group as well as their definition ultimately aligning with the theorists. A summarization of their definition of personal transformation is “a shift or change in one’s character, from within, that invokes a process of increasing self-awareness through moments of truth where an intention to navigate these moments awakens an individual to facilitate richer engagement in the world for greater impact and greater good through servant hood” (Interviewed Participants, November 2012).

Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Occupation
55	F	White	Self Employed - Coach and Consultant
40	M	African-American	Doctor of Choral Affairs at a University
23	F	African-American	Student
40	M	African-American	Self Employed - Athletic Trainer

Table 1: Novice Participant demographics – *Litmus Test*

The definition of personal transformation has the same sentiment regardless of being a theorist or novice. Ultimately, the desire is to have self-awareness so profound that it makes a person shift their personality or spirit by redefining how they respond to self and others.

The Defining Moment Towards a Personal Transformation

Eckhart Tolle shared the most insightful message in his book about humans in relation to earth and heaven:

We need to understand that heaven is not a location but refers to the inner realm of consciousness. This is the esoteric meaning of the word, and this is also its meaning in the teachings of Jesus. Earth, on the other hand, is the outer manifestation in form, which is always a reflection of the inner. Collective human consciousness and life on our planet are intrinsically connected. “A new heaven” is the emergence of a transformed state of human consciousness, and “a new earth” is its reflection in the physical realm. (2006, 23).

This message is appropriate as it correlates with several of the stories that participants shared in the reading about their journeys in life. They went into great detail of how they overcame tremendous obstacles in their lives. They all used a similar connotation, essentially, a turning point in their life. Something happens from the time that an incident occurs to the actual transformation. I coined this something, *The Defining Moment*. In our research, when triggers occurred in the participant’s life, steps towards personal transformation were not instantaneous.

During the research of scholarly articles and books, and through surveying participants, there were six standard questions for which we sought answers:

1. A concrete definition of personal transformation
2. When, where and what was the defining moment that triggered an individual’s thought of making a personal transformation in their life? Why and at what age?
3. How was this time different from other defining moments?
4. Where did the individual think they would be today had they not made the shift in their life?
5. Is there only one defining moment in a person’s life that causes them to want to make this kind of shift?
6. What is it about rock bottom that causes us to reassess?

This research effort focused on a self case study as a catalyst for personal development in cognitive therapy, transformational change research on surviving alcoholics that made a paradigm shift and contribution to society, and personal interviews done with participants in the state of North Carolina.

Self-case Study for Personal Development in Cognitive Therapy:

“The more self-aware and interpersonally effective a counselor can be the more they are able to effect change in others” (Fraser & Wilson, 2012, p. 108). The self case study involved an in depth exploration of a student’s own problem behavior as if they were onlooker; thus they had to develop a treatment plan. The students had to complete and record the following:

1. Provide a life review summarizing development, context and problem impact
 2. Apply learning theory explaining what factors maintain the problem behavior
 3. Identify the needs the problem behavior was attempting to meet
 4. Complete an assessment with goals with relevant interventions
 5. Write a cognitive conceptualization
- (Fraser & Wilson, 2012, p. 109).

After going through the process students identified problems such as procrastination, comfort eating, perfectionism, and social anxiety. Students shared feedback from what they learned as a result of going through the study. I have identified these (Table 2) as defining moments for some and personal transformation for others.

Category	Description	Participant Response(s)
Understanding the problem	Self assessment task	SA - Beginning of self awareness. It was an eerie experience. I hadn't even thought about it, that this (case study) was the catalyst until now. It is very confronting. SB - Very unsettling
The Writing Process	Writing in third person	All participants reported development of self-awareness and new perspectives.
Personal Development	Personal Transformation	Many participants attributed 'life changing' personal transformation to completing a self-case study SA - It has enabled me to work where I am, be in groups of people, um it has changed every part of my social self..and my children...it is enormous
Empathy	Compassion	Participants developed more empathy for their counseling clients as a direct result of their own self-practice and self development.

Table 2: Summarized Results from Cognitive Self-Case Study (Fraser & Wilson, 2010)

Recovering from Alcoholism

“We have the power to replace or supplement our dysfunctional organizing principles-and thereby interrupt our programming and fight our complexes-with new guiding principles”(Fogel, 2010, p. 107).Alcoholism is one of the most addictive diseases a person can have. Many have tried to start new lives and get off of this drug but have relapsed far too often.

The following seven participants were researched through a historical view of alcoholics that made it with the contributions they gave back to society. William White’s goal through his research was to show how clinical interest in transformational change stems from its potential healing effects. The following analysis (Table 3) shows the summarized analysis. All of the participants had the disorienting dilemma of alcoholism, went through a defining moment and transformational change. While 86% of the participants had a spiritual encounter during their defining moment, 57% of them had an alcohol relapse early in their recover, and one or 14% had a relapse later in their life. All made major contributions to society.

Name	Year	Defining Moment	Relapsed?	Contribution	Spiritua I
Handsome Lake	1735 - 1815	Was thought to have in 1799 but awoke during preparation for burial announcing that the Great Spirit had visited him and sent him back to life with a message for the Indian people.	No	Promulgated Code of Handsome Lake - a cultural revitalization movement and framework for alcoholism recovery.	Yes
John Gough	1817 - 1886	Stranger stopped and befriended him on the street. Expression of kindness and hope marked an emotional turning point.	Yes - early in the process but then remained sober.	Became a leader of the Washingtonian movement in early 1840s bringing thousands into recovery through speeches, consultations, and correspondence.	No
Francis Murphy	1836 - 1907	In jail, missionary's words touched his heart and led to his conversion and recovery.	No	Founded the Blue Ribbon Reform Club Movement that brought thousands of alcoholics into recovery throughout New England.	Yes
Jerry McAuley	1839 - 1884	Series of conversions during and following his incarceration in Sing Sing Prison.	Yes - early in the process but then remained sober.	Founded The Water Street Mission that pioneered evangelical outreach to the drunkard and inspired the growth of urban rescue missions and rural inebriate colonies through the US.	Yes
Bill Wilson	1895 - 1971	Reached rock bottom in hospital during detoxification. He cried, "If there is a God, let Him show Himself!" the room became ablaze with light and he was overwhelmed by a presence and vision.	No	Co-founded Alcoholics Anonymous	Yes
Marty Mann	1904 - 1980	Had an out of body experience while undergoing treatment, saw the Alcoholics Anonymous book "We cannot live with anger"; dropped to her knees and prayed. She arose knowing that she was a different person.	Yes - early in the process 3, and 1 two decades later and then remained sober.	Became the first woman to recover successfully in Alcoholics Anonymous, became a central figure in the modern alcoholism movement, and one of America's most successful public-health reformers.	Yes
Malcolm X	1925 - 1965	Transforming moment occurred in a prison cell via a vision of W. D. Fard, the deceased messiah of the Nation of Islam.	No	Through his influence, the Nation of Islam became a cultural pathway of addiction recovery for African-American me.	Yes

Table 3: Summary of William White's Historical Analysis on Survivors of Alcoholism (2004, pp. 462-466)

Personal Interview Participants

The four participants were included for the same six questions for comparison. Based on the responses, question six (What is it about rock bottom that causes us to reassess?) was a trigger for question two (What was the defining moment towards a personal transformation?). The participants had all hit rock bottom in their life. They described rock bottom as being painful or in a pit of hell (actually or symbolically).

The quick fixes to mask reality did not work anymore. A way out did not seem possible, and then realization set in. A choice had to be made between living or dying. To choose life meant to pick up the pieces and access resources that could assist. To choose death was to allow thoughts, guilt, shame, remorse, anger, rage, hurt, and past to consume their identity. The four participants and the majority of the participant's research in the books and articles chose to live. When the novice participants were asked where they would be had they chosen a different direction, they unanimously had responses that limited their quality of life. It is my belief that the very instant that the individuals chose to live was their defining moment towards personal transformation. They now needed to fully go through the stages of personal transformation with tools to support them along their journey.

Stages of Personal Transformation

Mezzirow, Clark, and Loder each defined phases that a person goes through during a personal transformation. The following provides insight on each:

Transformational Change

W. H. Clark provided an introduction to religious experience and behavior. He described three stages of the entire process of transformational change in three stages:

1. Unrest and conflict – feelings of unworthiness, shame, and incompleteness
2. Conversion crisis – sudden breakthrough of illumination
3. A sense of peace, release, and inner harmony

(White, 2004, p. 466).

Logic of Transformation

James E. Loder, Professor of the Philosophy of Christian Education at Princeton Theological Seminary, said "Transformation experiences are built upon a personal history and often constitute a critical detonation point of past experience (1989). He notes five stages of what calls "logic of transformation":

1. Conflict – a dissonance in the soul
2. Interlude for scanning - search for a resolution
3. Intuitive insight – breakthrough experience of truth
4. Release and openness for new patterns of thinking and being
5. Interpretation and verification – experience is filtered through significant others for validation.

(White, 2004, p. 466).

Perspective Transformation

Mezirow's theory of transformative learning proposes that deep transformations of perspectives occur only when learners are able to reflect critically on the underlying premises of their understandings (Fleischer, 2006, p. 147). He said there are ten steps or phases leading to a new perception of the world. They are as follow:

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
3. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
4. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
5. A critical assessment of assumptions
6. Provisional trying of new roles
7. Planning of a course of action
8. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective

(Brock, 2010, p. 123).

Barbara Fleischer took Mezirow's phases a step farther and blended it with the Lonergan's theological anthropology and method to present an overview of transformative learning and offer a theological reflection rooted in the Christian tradition (Fleischer, 2006, p. 147). Ultimately, I feel this could be a successful practice to follow in theology; however, there are still questions today surrounding the success such as, "Might the heavy emphasis on critical reflection suggested by this theory become destructive rather than supportive of faith (Fleischer, 2006, p. 153)?"

Although three of the theorists have varying stages or phases in their process, they are all relative and consistent in that they each have a foundational interest spiritually and thus drives their perspectives and outlooks on change. All of their stages start with a trigger or an event that caused an unsettling emotion based on some type of conflict; however, by the end of the stages, they vary on how a person actually moves forward in their new realm. Mezirow gives the individual the ownership on the conditions they dictate for their life where Loder has the individual looking for verification and validation from others. Loder’s outlook seems as if it could potentially cause the individual to digress or retract to old ways if they are influence down the wrong path or if the significant other does not approve of the individual’s new definition or outlook on life.

Tools to Assist Those Going through a Personal Transformation

“The purpose of human inquiry is not so much the search for truth, but to heal” (Reason, 1994, p. 10).The research identified two of many potential resources that could assist a person going through a personal transformation. The following provides insight on each approach:

I. Process of Personal Change Through Reading Fictional Narratives

Within schematic representation, “narrative is considered to be a construction that houses information, values, and ideas, and that can shape viewpoints and behavioral options” Gonclaves, Korman, & Angus’s work (As cited in, Levitt, Rattanasampan, Sean, Stanley, & Robinson, 2000). A qualitative study was done with six participants at the University of Memphis to gain an understanding of how and when they experienced a transformational change as a consequence of reading a fictional narrative. The criteria for inclusion; the student must have read a fictional narrative (defined as including at least one character and one plotline) that in return had a profound impact upon their lives. Face to face interviews were done with the six participants to gain insight on their overall experience. Below, Table 4is the analysis of clusters and categories which shares the impact the narrative had on each individual. Based on the results in the table, 67% of the participants developed greater self awareness by relating to the characters in the book. All of the participants shared that inspirational examples in characters lead to attitude change; however, only one person or 16% of the participants felt that connecting spirituality can allow readings to be healing. New perspectives were gained from the stories and gave a different view on the world.

<i>Clusters</i>	<i>N¹</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>N²</i>
1. Identification with characters triggers attitude change as it increases self awareness and inspires dedication to values	6	1. Values are altered as reader is more compassionate to characters or broadens attitudes toward situation, unless values are in conflict	6
		2. Developed greater self awareness by relating to characters	4
		3. Inspirational examples in characters lead to attitude change	6
2. Books can be transformatory as they bring artistic joy and interpersonal connection	6	1. Books can be given to communicate, but after given can foster future communication	4
		2. Sense of joy while reading	6
3. People use stories to give them hope to deal with frightening problems: They broaden one’s sense of possibility in a safe venue	6	3. Memorable parts were applicable, exciting, confirming aspect of self-identity	6
		1. Books provided comfort and help potential changes to feel less risky	5
		2. Stories read or re-read at times of transition or problems in life.	6
		3. Stories are especially used in difficult circumstances.	5
		4. Connected spirituality can allow readings to be healing.	1
		5. Inspiration from the characters: About possibility of love and happiness.	3
4. Insights arise from adopting new perspectives and evaluating one’s beliefs	6	6. Reading stories provide participants with a sense of hope or inspiration to deal with life challenges or fears.	5
		1. New perspectives gained from stories influenced participants to view the world in a more positive way.	6
		2. Special features of the books influenced participants to adopt new perspectives	4
		3. Participants assessed their personal value in relation to the value in stories before deciding whether they would adopt the values from stories.	4
5. Communication changes in relationships to be more honest, as you know what you want and better appreciate what you have	5	1. Stories increased participants’ awareness in themselves and how other people felt.	2
		2. Participants changed their communication behaviors to be more expressive and honest.	5

Note. *N¹* = The number of participants of 6 who endorsed that cluster. *N²* = The number of participants of 6 who endorsed that category.

Table 4: Analyses of Clusters and Categories and the Participants’ Endorsement (Levitt, Rattanasampan, Chaaidaroon, Stanley, Robinson, 2009)

When asked to articulate the personal change in their life from reading, participants were able to articulate how the story triggered something within, a defining moment, that altered trajectory of their life. As an example, one participant described the below,

a classic story he read about war strategy as inspirational and as helping him to remain determined in the face of adversity and not to be too worried about something that has not happened; while another read a story about a courageous girl and she learned that the best way to get through something is to accept it and if you can do it with joy, than the purpose is the journey (Levitt, Rattanasampan, Chaidaroon, Stanley, & Robinson, 2009).

This model gives an individual the opportunity to identify a fictional narrative which seems rather nonthreatening and see if it is anything that they can learn from the characters to drive change in their lives. Although these participants read the novels for pleasure, they were able to transform and redefine an outlook on life that they would have otherwise not have through their reading experience. My own theory is that when a person reads they anticipate what will happen next in the story. This is an emotion of wonder. "A multidisciplinary investigation of wonder reveals that human emotion can be a source of significant personal transformation" (Fuller, 2006).

II. Experiential Learning

Gene Wade's model case (Figure 1) is a conceptual map of a transformation process she used during her research (Wade, 1998, p. 717). The purpose of the model case was to test to see if there was a strong relationship between experiential learning and personal transformation. She used this model case with a pediatric student that did not feel she could care effectively for children because she felt sorry for them and could not deal with the pain and was going to resign from the program. Below is the outcome of the implementation of the conceptual map of transformation process:

The model case does illustrate a strong relationship between experiential learning and personal transformation. When the student was exposed to the nurse-client relationship in the pediatric setting, she was faced with a disorienting dilemma which created uncomfortable feeling about children and pain. This caused conflict and made her question her ability to care for children. Through reflective journals, the student critically examined her feelings. The instructor dialogued with the student and provided a variety of experience that forced the student to address her feelings. Through personal self-questioning and a variety of exploratory experience, the student developed a new self-definition and eagerly embraced her choice to become a pediatric nurse.(Wade, 1998, p. 718).

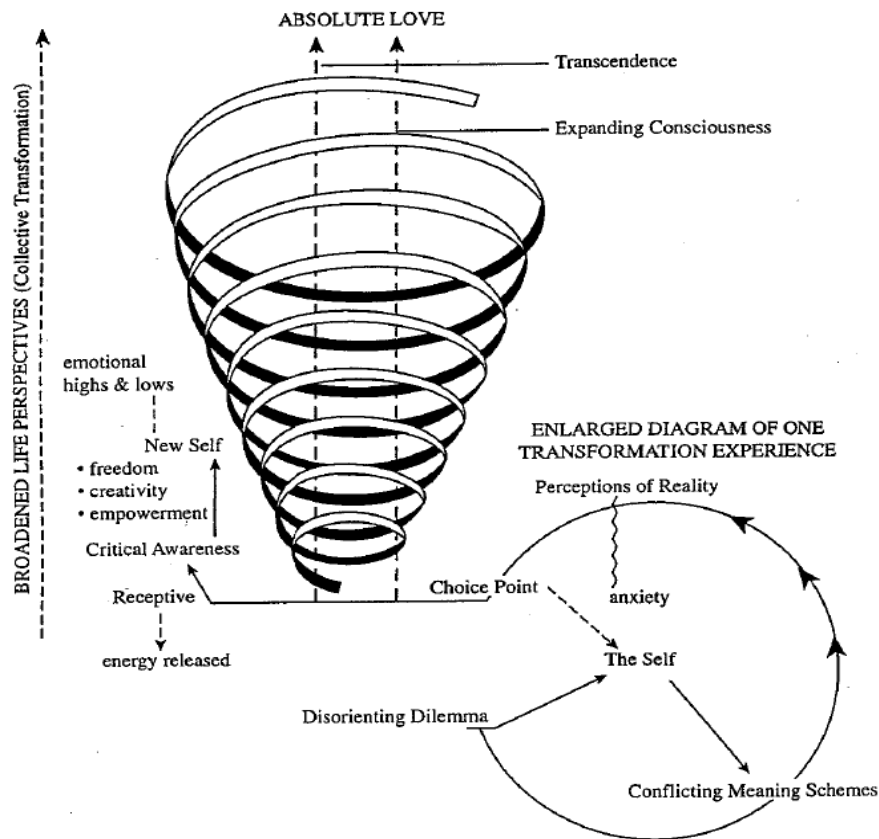


Figure 1: Model Case: A Conceptual Map of the Transformation Process (Wade, 1998).

This is an excellent model that gives an individual going through a personal transformation the opportunity to not only reflect and write their feelings, but work in a setting which allows them to work through, conquer their fears, and make a decision that is ultimately best for their life.

Both of the tools shared were case studies that need further research, but I feel that enough research has been done to further this work and assist in the production of greater qualitative and qualitative results. The ability to redefine who you are by doing, experiential learning, and read fictional narratives while identifying things within a character that could assist in overall development is profound and insightful.

Future Research on Personal Transformation

Is rock bottom or a catastrophic event the only way a person comes to a defining moment for personal transformation? During my research, it appeared that pain or having a severe tragic situation would be the only way to experience a defining moment for change to occur. I think further studies should be done with individuals that have not had anything tragic to happen in their life and see if they can be intentional in identifying ways to transform themselves to have an enhanced positive and productive life. “Intention is generally viewed as a pit-bull kind of determination, propelling one to succeed at all costs by never giving up on the inner picture” (Dyer, 2004). As we encourage this outlook, we can follow the thoughts of Kurt Lewin, “A successful individual typically sets his next goal somewhat but not too much above his last achievement. In this way he steadily raises his level of aspiration”.

Out of all of the stages I researched, Mezirow resonates with me the most. However, peers and theorists in his industry suggest that his theory is not solid and has some concerns. It would be great to further analyze his perspective transformation to see what if any enhancements can be done for the field of study.

Not much in-depth research has been done on “wonder” or “insight”, but I believe there is a correlation to how people view things in such a way that helps them in their transformational process. For instance, using Lewin’s field theory, Rosner (2000) described insight as resulting from a shift in the demands of a situation, allowing for the reorganization of self-perceptions and a new expression of existing knowledge.

This leaves me to believe that additional tools can be created to assist and enhance an individual going through a transformation through inquiry and insight.

There have been so many case studies and reviews in nursing, from clinical to self-case studies as well as in the field of education. More needs to be done individually with people to broaden our horizon and knowledge of how people think and work to transform outside of group settings or with psychologists. We are all capable of working through extenuating situations if our arsenals are loaded with key nuggets to assist us in succeeding.

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