

Resilience – as Imagination

David R. Weiss – March 15, 2019

The Gospel in Transition #14 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

The Transition movement is grounded a two-fold recognition.⁴⁸ First, fossil fuel is finite and, at some point in the not too distant future, production *will* begin to decline, leading to cost increases that will *require* us to transition to other energy sources. That’s not about preference or convenience, it’s about (initially) economic necessity and (eventually) material necessity when oil and gas become not simply costly but downright scarce. Second, we now know—and have known for decades!—that using fossil fuels is slow-cooking the planet. It’s altering the atmosphere in ways that will have repercussions on Earth’s climate for decades even after we stop using them.

Ultimately this isn’t a matter of political debate or a lifestyle preference. It’s about a fast approaching collision between past (and present!) choices, scientific fact, and basic math. And sadly, primarily because of corporate and political and even religious resistance (add in some personal human stubbornness as well, but this is *small* compared to the other driving forces) this is going to be an ugly collision.

So Transition takes it for granted that we NEED to transition away from an economic life (and a culinary life and a cultural life and a transportation life and a recreational life ...) that depends on fossil fuel. In that sense, transition itself isn’t so much a choice the transition movement argues for, as it is simply the shape of the future it foresees. *We will transition*. What makes Transition distinctive, though, is that it has no interest in going into that fossil fuel-less world kicking and screaming, nor even with somber resignation. No, it’s *eager* to pursue transition because the Transition movement sees a host of *good things* coming our way. More on that later, but in short it sees the our transition away from fossil fuel as offering the opportunity to renew communities in vibrant, localized way that will deepen our humanity, our health, and our joy.

BUT—that doesn’t mean the aforementioned collision is going to be anything other than ugly. Which is where resilience comes in. More than merely the capacity to bounce back after a hard shock, in Transition, resilience includes the inner confidence that as communities we can, indeed, withstand the coming shock, and can move forward beyond it ... toward something that may be radically simpler but also radically better. And *therefore* rather than passively waiting for the shock to hit us, resilience says we can *choose* to move toward that fossil fuel-less future. Resilience allows us to lean into transition with an urgency that is tempered by both confidence and longing. One key facet of resilience, as I mentioned in my last post, is *to enliven imagination in a political-economic-cultural system designed to shut it down*.⁴⁹

Fossil fuel dependency endangers both us and the planet so “effectively” because it permeates so many systems. It’s central to producing and transporting almost everything we make and much of the food we eat. We rely on it to light and heat our homes, run our appliances, and get us from here to there to everywhere. It’s bound up with our comfort and convenience, but also with many things necessary for civilized society. Put all these things together and it’s just plain hard to imagine other ways of life that are so drenched (in largely unseen, non-greasy ways) in oil.

Add to this short list that the fossil fuel industry is extraordinarily profitable, and we have a scenario in which lack of imagination isn’t simply a matter of personal or even societal laziness, it’s *orchestrated*. We live in a political-economic-cultural system *designed* to shut imagination down. Today we may be more nuanced in our understanding of how these systems work, but, as I’ve noted earlier ([GIT #6 “Home by Another Route”](#)) this is hardly a new insight altogether. It’s exactly what the apostle Paul means when he observes that our lives are constrained not only by the temptations or the mere limits that come with

⁴⁸ <http://transitionus.org/why-transition>

⁴⁹ Rob Hopkins and Sarah McAdams in “The Transition Movement: Past, Present, and Future,” roundtable discussion, 2018 Transition US Tenth Anniversary Online Summit: www.transitiongathering.org/videos.

being human but also by “powers and principalities”—amoral but deadly forces that get embedded in systems. Human choices conspire with them, but even human passivity acts as accomplice because these forces operate with a relentless inertia of their own that welcomes our indifference ... or our distraction.⁵⁰

In this context—and spanning two thousand years—Jesus’ parables and teaching persist as seeds that seek to expand our vision beyond what is and focus our attention on what matters. Such gifts are more necessary than ever today because the stakes involve the entire human community as well the flora and fauna across the planet. Churches (indeed faith communities of all stripes) MUST become places where enlivening our capacity for vital social imagination is not viewed as a civic nicety separate from church but as a ministry imperative. It is the pressure of the gospel on the present moment—and it is always pressing for transformation.

Thus, it is a matter of remembering—and reclaiming—*who we are*. At the heart of Jesus’ ministry was his announcement of the “kingdom of God.” More clumsily—but more accurately—rendered as “the activity of God reigning as king,” Jesus’ parables, healings, and table fellowship both image and embody the surprise and reversal that accompany the energy of God as it moves through our world.

While Jesus uses kingdom language (likely as a *severe critique* of human kingship) we might today name the positive dynamic of divine energy as *kin-making* activity. This radical unsettling grace transforms children, Samaritans, women, even lepers into mascots of God’s kin-dom. It resides as the revolutionary spirit behind Jesus’ commission that we see his visage on the least of these in our world. It drives Paul to declare a “new creation” in which there is “neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, nor male and female” (Gal. 3:28). *Of course* these differences remain, *but they no longer serve as reasons for division*. (Except that the powers and principalities continue to play these differences off against each other: rich vs. poor; human vs. nonhuman; first world vs. developing world; labor vs. environment, etc.)

For this reason, *biblical literacy is a progressive Christian value*. It enables us recover the full power of the gospel, producing inward *and* outward transformation at both personal *and* societal levels. The gospel declares the love of God for the *whole* of creation and beckons us to imagine a world—in *this* world—that echoes God’s love, not simply for those most like us, but even and especially for those least among us, whether human or non-human. This imagining is what the Transition movement calls for, although it frames this in secular language. But as faith communities we not only have a clear doorway into this conversation, we also have both a heritage to honor and a vocation to answer. Called to be this generation’s new creation community, Christian imagination invites us to lean into transition with an urgency that is tempered by both confidence and longing.

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⁵⁰ Just in February 2019 Joe Balash, U.S. assistant secretary for land and minerals management told a meeting of companies involved in oil exploration, “One of the things I have found absolutely thrilling (!) in working for this administration is that the president has a knack for keeping the attention of the media and the public focused somewhere else while we do all the work that needs to be done on behalf of the American people.” Whether he’s serious or cynical in calling this “work on behalf of the American people,” his recognition that the fossil fuel industry is aided by distraction is all too accurate.

www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/mar/14/offshore-drilling-trump-official-reveals-plan-and-distractions-delight.

Resilience – as Deep Agency

David R. Weiss – March 17, 2019

The Gospel in Transition #15 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

As I begin week 15 of my yearlong pledge, I'm keenly aware that each post I write begs for further development. Many of these short essays contain the seeds enough for an entire book chapter in them. Perhaps eventually I'll come back to selected posts and fill them out further. For now the discipline of weekly blogging is helpful in getting a wide array of ideas out of the table, and I trust that as I devote myself further to this work, next steps will present themselves.

In this post I want to consider the second of four key facets to the Transition movement: that we must tap into deep agency, both as individuals and as local communities.⁵¹ Transition names the necessary commitment to shift away from the dominant expression of modern life insofar as it depends on intensive fossil fuel consumption. It seeks this transition because it recognizes that fossil fuel use is directly tied the catastrophic climate change currently occurring around the world, and also because it asserts that we can actually live *fuller* lives when we choose social patterns that are more in keeping with the planet's natural limits.

Such patterns will produce lives that are overall necessarily (and rewardingly) more local in meeting the whole range of human needs. Precisely because these transitions will succeed only to the extent they fit their context, they require *deep agency*. Part of Transition movement's wisdom is to trust that there is no central monopoly on environmental wisdom. Almost by its nature—indeed, *by the planet's nature*—all environmental wisdom is local. Each place has its own unique eco-character and if human communities are to live in harmony with the planet that will happen place by place by place.

In transition, no one size fits all. No top-down hierarchy calls the shots. Yes, there are a number of requisite principles and skills. But beyond them, improvisation wins the day. And the hallmark of improvisation with integrity in one's own ecological context is deep agency. It is knowing who we are, where we are, what's needed in *this* place (both for Earth and for community)—and then making real choices toward transition from this knowledge. Imagination, creativity, vision, knowledge—these are foundational. But the energy to animate all of them in coordination rests in deep agency: the near miracle of taking charge of our lives within worlds that profit by keeping us consumer-cogs of the status quo. Deep agency involves becoming citizen-architects of the world that awaits our fashioning.

Citizen-architects. Who knew this could be such a high Christian calling? Well, Jesus and Paul, for two. And the author of Luke-Acts as well. Not that it is much in evidence in most churches today, where personal-communal-religious-civic agency are often a buried legacy, covered over by the multiple powers of clergy, money, tradition, and fear, all of which tend to erase the deep agency that is our vocation and Christian birthright. I'm *not* anti-clergy, though I might make an exception in a few specific instances ... and I'm *not* anti-tradition, though I'm decidedly wary of traditions that too easily become more focused on self-preservation rather than anchoring vibrant responses to the present and being open to self-transformation in that process.

However, the vocation of citizen-architect—part of the church's earliest tradition—is one tradition essential to fostering the deep agency needed for transition. It begins in Jesus' ministry, where time and again Jesus himself shows far less interest in being atop a hierarchy than his later followers imagine (which they do more to their benefit than to the gospel's). Jesus, for his part, sends the disciples out in pairs (Matt. 10:1-15 || Luke 10:1-20) telling them to share with those in need the same energy that swirls

⁵¹ I introduced these in [GIT #13, "Redeemed for Resilience."](#) They were identified by Rob Hopkins and Sarah McAdams in "The Transition Movement: Past, Present, and Future," roundtable discussion, 2018 Transition US Tenth Anniversary Online Summit: www.transitiongathering.org/videos.

within him—and to do so freely. In fact, Jesus promises them (John 14:12) they will ultimately do things *beyond* what they’ve seen Jesus himself do. Not because they become greater than Jesus, but because the Spirit’s empowering energy within the community of his followers will ripen over time.

This commissioning as veritable equals becomes yet clearer when Jesus extends the “keys to the kingdom” to his disciples (Matt. 16:9). He tells them their authority is now sufficient to “bind or loose” (to forbid or permit) which, I’d argue, is less about establishing rules than it is about charting the way forward into uncharted territory. In a similar scene in John’s Gospel Jesus breathes on the disciples as a way of sharing God’s Breath/Spirit with them (John 20:22). It is about conferring deep agency. And doing so, not so much in his absence, but in his ongoing though invisible presence (John 14:15-28). Matthew captures this in the closing words of his Gospel, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20).

So Jesus establishes a community committed to a new way of being together in the world grounded in a notion of God’s radical grace and manifest in the practice of compassion toward one another. And he tethers them not to a fixed set of rules but to the living presence of Spirit, confident that the Spirit will guide the church as it exercises deep agency. When Luke extends his tale of Jesus from the Gospel into the Acts of the Apostles, he continues to show prayer as intentional opening to the Spirit. Just as Luke’s Jesus carries out his ministry persistently grounding his actions in prayer, Luke offers a portrait of the early church similarly drawing its life out of prayer. Its devotional life, to be sure (Acts 1:14; Acts 2:42), *but also its socio-economic life* (Acts 2:44-45). The early church was not simply (perhaps not even primarily) a movement driven by beliefs about the next world, but a daring, Spirit-driven movement about life in *this* world.

Still, citizen-architects? *Yes, exactly.* When St. Paul exhorts the early church at Corinth to “exercise bold speech” (2 Corinthians 3:12, often rendered—domesticated!—as “acting with boldness”) he is, in fact, using the Greek word (*parresia*) that is the specific term for the “free speech” exercised only by the free property-owning men who gathered in the assembly of Roman cities to chart their community’s future.⁵² The Christians to whom Paul was writing would have known this—precisely because it was speech forbidden to many of them: women, aliens, and slaves. Yet, emphatically for Paul, it was the baptismal birthright of *every person* in the church (free, slave, male, female, rich, poor, Jew, Gentile) to have *parresia*. Such bold speech was none other than the deep agency that guided the unfolding future of the church.

Once again we see why *biblical literacy is a progressive Christian value.* Our roots run back to a church in which agency was granted to—*indeed commissioned to*—every member in the community. This deep agency was fed by the gospel announcement of grace and the gospel praxis of compassion, and guided by the Spirit. *Our Christian vocation is to be citizen-architects of a different world.* In each generation we are called to envision the world that is needed—and then to bring that world into being. In *this* generation the world needed is one in transition. We’ll need to learn much from those beyond the church to better understand the world that is needed. But the breadth of empowerment that can help bring it to life...*that* lies within our own heritage, if only we dare to reclaim it. *I say it’s time to take that dare.*

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⁵² David Fredrickson, “Free Speech in Pauline Political Theology,” *Word & World*, 12:4 (1992), pp. 345-351.

Resilience – and Earthbound Skills

David R. Weiss – March 24, 2019

The Gospel in Transition #16 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

This week I take up the third of four key facets to the Transition Movement: that we reclaim and share the very earthbound skills required in this moment.⁵³ If you hear a soft-spoken ominous edge in that phrase, it's intentional. Transition does *not* promote a doomsday portrait of the future. But it is a *movement made by math*, so to speak, and the numbers—from those that estimate the oil/gas reserves beneath the ground to those that measure with apocalyptic precision the rising CO₂ in the atmosphere above us—well, the numbers portend a future that (like it or not) will look *very different* from the one we've taken as our birthright.

Thus, Transition asks us to imagine moving *toward* that future rather than denying its need or passively waiting for its inevitable encroachment into our lives. For one, that future will be dramatically less centered around the extraction and use of fossil fuel. But, more than this, that future—sooner or later—will also (and just as necessarily) be centered less around consumption period. Even as we develop newer, cleaner ways to generate energy, produce goods, and get around—quite apart from all such advances—*we inhabit a finite planet*. Even with an abundance of renewable energy, the material wealth we count as “success” cannot be extended across the globe without exhausting the planet itself. Whether we embrace a renewed appreciation for simplicity on this side or the far side of socio-industrial-ecological collapse is up to us. Embracing it on this side, might actually avoid forcing our children to face life on the far side. Or maybe not; hard to say. There's that soft-spoken ominous edge again.

Nevertheless, Transition places its focus on the surprising goodness of lives that choose “local and less” in the genuine confidence that these choices actually mean “deeper and more.” Which brings us to what I've named “earthbound skills.”

The big-picture lecture I give about Christian spirituality in a time of climate change is titled “At Home on Earth.” I chose that title because I think the roots of our disastrous relationship with this planet and its entire ecological community are tied up with an unspoken assumption that since our “true” (heavenly?) home, is somewhere other than this place, whatever this place is, it's NOT home and so it doesn't really count. On the contrary, I think the *truest* Christian message—the truest *human* message regardless of which faith tradition it's refracted through—is that *Earth is home*. Regardless of how you or I think about an afterlife, in *this* life ... and during the lives of all the generations before and after us ... Earth is home. It provides all our material needs, and we overstep its capacity to provide (we take at a rate faster than nature can renew) to the detriment of all (human and nonhuman) who come after us and many who share the planet with us right now.

When a finite planet is home, *simplicity* (an active notion of enough that is humane and ecologically sensible) *is at once a moral obligation and an act of reverence*. Thankfully, as Transition suggests, it is also a choice for festive wisdom: it is the doorway through which lies existential joy. Not to the exclusion of natural disaster, unforeseen tragedy, human sorrow—these will always be found within the fabric of finitude. But when life is lived oriented toward “local and less” even these become more bearable because community grows stronger when it reflects the planet's preferences, of which an intimate acquaintance with enough is front and center.

So, by “earthbound skills,” I mean the practical knowledge that helps us reclaim the sense of Earth ... *as Home*. There are a multitude of such skills that Transition thinking identifies and supports. They literally span the gamut of our lives: food, housing, transportation, education, healthcare. How would we

⁵³ I introduced these in [GIT #13, “Redeemed for Resilience.”](#) They were identified by Rob Hopkins and Sarah McAdams in “The Transition Movement: Past, Present, and Future,” roundtable discussion, 2018 Transition US Tenth Anniversary Online Summit: www.transitiongathering.org/videos.

retool our lives—beginning locally, personally, in our natural communities—if we took seriously the need to “homestead”? To live as if *this place*—right here—needed to sustain us indefinitely, and by drawing fairly on resources available to us and to others? Because, um, *it does*. What would we work to undo? What new projects would we envision and undertake? (There are lots of resources to seed this conversation and someday I’ll dedicate a whole column to them; www.transitionus.org/knowledge-hub is a gateway to many resources. Right now my own learning curve remains steep!)

My goal today is to say that while this may strike us as a radical, almost disorienting shift in worldview, it shouldn’t. It actually has ancient roots within Christianity, albeit roots we’ve neglected too long except as aspirational imagery.

When Luke tells us that the early church held everything in common, with members sharing freely out of their excess and receiving freely for their needs (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35), he isn’t describing some perfect eschatological commune. He’s offering a mundane image of an imperfect church grasped by a worldview that saw the church radically called to be there for each other. If you read the rest of Acts you see how imperfect it was at times, and yet it *was* a community seeking to live out Jesus’ invitation that we see his face in the eyes of those in need (Matthew 25:32-45). It *was* a community imagining life beyond the value-laden divisions of Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, rich and poor (Gal. 3:28; I Cor. 11:17-22). It *was* a community experimenting with truth (as Gandhi might say) in being the Body of Christ (I Cor. 12) where the diversity of gifts (spiritual, intellectual, emotional, practical) was not intended for competition but for compassion, for sustaining the health of the whole Body together.

Obviously, in the early church this mindset was not exercised against the backdrop of an impending climate crisis, but it was communally embodied ... in daily life ... shaped by the context of its day ... fueled by vivid spiritual imagery and ritual ... in a society that dismissed (and at times persecuted) this intermingling of justice and joy. *And we need those things today*. One of the transcendent (nearly theological) insights of the Transition Movement is that when localized community energy is freely shared to meet the needs of the moment in shaping a better (less fossil-fuel-fed) future, in that exchange, community is strengthened, justice happens (needs are met without exploitation), joy is generated—and in the midst of all of this: *hope grows and imagination reaches out yet farther*.

Church communities are “pre-seeded soil” for this type of eco-centered ministry. The same energy that undergirds church potlucks, funeral luncheons, quilting groups, workdays, etc. (energy often flagging today, but still echoing in our traditions), might ... *must* be revitalized and redirected as one part of the larger movement to transition away from acquisitive lives that have never been truly abundant and toward lives that offer us so much more. Among the local “needs of this moment” are an array of mundane “home-making” skills, some of them from reclaimed from yesteryear, others leaning into tomorrow. All of them will prosper through cross-generational skills-sharing in communities where diverse gifts and generous spirits abide.

Indeed, if churches choose to revitalize and deepen their practice of Christian fellowship, applying it earnestly toward *Earth fellowship* as envisioned by the Transition Movement, they’ll find not only a wealth of renewed energy and hope, they’ll discover what it feels like to know Earth as God intended: as Home.

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Resilience – Without Waiting for Permission

David R. Weiss – March 28, 2019

The Gospel in Transition #17 – [Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com](http://www.davidrweiss.com)

From catastrophic flooding in the U.S. Midwest⁵⁴ to Cyclone Idai’s devastation of southeastern Africa⁵⁵ to the recent confirmation we’re living in the warmest decade since records have been kept,⁵⁶ the reality of climate change is hitting us everywhere these days. Except in Congress, where we continue to be regularly embarrassed by politicians who take the floor to mock climate science and ignore the suffering being multiplied all around us.⁵⁷ Taken together, these two observations explain the fourth core insight of the Transition Movement: that we should (1) enliven imagination, (2) tap into deep agency, (3) reclaim and share earthbound skills ... (4) *without waiting for permission from the “governing” (political, corporate, and cultural) forces around us.*⁵⁸

Convinced that climate change is already upon us—and that any livable future will necessarily look different than the past-present that brought us to this point—Transition believes that the faster we embrace that different future, the better off we and all future generations will be. And Transition affirms that the fastest, healthiest way to transition is *local*. Local transition leverages the energy available among people in neighborhoods and communities as its own natural resource. Resilience in the face of climate change arises not only by changing how we live but also by *strengthening the bonds* that join us to each other as we work for a human community more in harmony with the planet. Resilience is as much a social deepening as it is a technological transformation.

Transition’s fourth insight is critical because the “governing” (political, corporate, and cultural) forces around us are often *conflicted*—so entangled in profit interests or the preservation of power that they actually become tools in *preventing* the changes needed for our survival. Only rarely do they actively foster positive change. And if we wait for their permission to transition, our worlds—both social and natural, both local and global—will be in a shambles before we’re officially “permitted” to change. This is yet another place where Christian origins can inspire us today.

The Jesus movement unfolded in a society ... *without permission*. In Jesus’ day, Roman society espoused values that ran wholly contrary to the radical hospitality and compassion that Jesus taught and practiced. Even the dominant expression of Jesus’ own Jewish tradition—deeply grounded by the prophets in hospitality and compassion—was persistently tempted to seek ways to preserve a measure of its own power under Roman rule so that it also worked to suppress its best impulses. Indeed they both exerted enormous political, social, and religious pressure to conform to values designed to keep society fragmented and stratified between a variety of in-group/out-group divisions that left no room, *no permission*, for community that didn’t come at the expense of some “other.”

For Jesus to announce the good news of God’s grace—radical acceptance-welcome-affirmation—as the basis for a new community could only happen by *not waiting for permission*. Across my last four essays I’ve given just the barest glimpses into some of the ways that the ministry of the historical Jesus and the earliest patterns of the Christian church were far more *this worldly* in their focus than many of us grew up thinking. This is not to say that Jesus and the earliest Christians did not have truly deep convictions

⁵⁴ www.thinkprogress.org/deadly-flooding-midwest-nebraska-climate-impacts-ac8865fd6160

⁵⁵ www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/19/cyclone-idai-worst-weather-disaster-to-hit-southern-hemisphere-mozambique-malawi

⁵⁶ www.truthout.org/articles/were-living-in-the-warmest-decade-since-record-keeping-began

⁵⁷ www.commondreams.org/news/2019/03/26/if-guy-can-be-senator-you-can-do-anything-progressives-mock-mike-lees-climate-speech

⁵⁸ I introduced these in [GIT #13, “Redeemed for Resilience.”](#) They were identified by Rob Hopkins and Sarah McAdams in “The Transition Movement: Past, Present, and Future,” roundtable discussion, 2018 Transition US Tenth Anniversary Online Summit: www.transitiongathering.org/videos.

about an Ultimate and Gracious Reality they knew as God. But it is to be clear that they *experienced God* as impinging graciously *in this world*: redeeming ... renewing ... altogether remaking the conditions in which human life found possibility. And that aspect of Jesus ministry and the early church is profoundly worth reclaiming today.⁵⁹

A few snippets. In a classic exchange with the Pharisees (Mk 12:13-17 || Mt 22:15-22 || Lk 20:20-26), Jesus is asked whether it's lawful to pay tribute to Caesar. It's a trick question. To say, Yes—as Roman law demanded—would break Jewish law by paying the tax (as required) with a coin that proclaimed Caesar as god. To say, No—as Jewish law demanded in its strict rejection of any actions that gave even the appearance of idolatry—would break Roman law. Jesus' good options are reduced to none. But in a move that perhaps anticipates James T. Kirk's response to the *Kobayashi Maru* dilemma in Star Trek,⁶⁰ Jesus ... cheats. Well, he alters the frame.

After asking whose image appears on a Roman coin, Jesus responds, “Then give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.” The catch is two-fold. First, for a Jew *all things are God's*, leaving—in truth—nothing that belongs to Caesar. Second, for a Jew, because every human being bears the image of God—and together in our common humanity and infinite diversity we bear witness to the unity and infinity of God—and therefore, that paltry Roman coin, with its cheap attempt to replicate the very finite image of Caesar endlessly across the empire ... well, actually it just shows how far short Caesar falls of the greatness of God. So if you must pay the tax to survive, you will not be judged for that. In fact, your payment might even be made as something of an insult to the Emperor.⁶¹

But that is not to say that every hard choice has an easy out. When we consider new mining initiatives in Minnesota's northlands or the Line 3 pipeline project: whose image is reflected in the boundary waters? Whose life-giving nature appears in the aquifers beneath the land? Whose sacred presence is known in the wild rice? Whose character upholds the weight of treaties (even if we choose to break them)? These questions do not resolve on so neat a turn of wit. But to recall that Jesus reframed dilemmas to reveal both their stakes and our other options is critical for us today.

Walter Wink (among others) reveals the extent to which the Jesus' famous words (Mt 5:39-42 || Lk 6:29-30), about turning a cheek, giving a cloak, or walking an extra mile are *all* exhortations to not simply trust in the long arc of the moral universe, but to *bend it* with nonviolent human action.⁶² Perhaps because, if the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice, it will be because of those who bear the image of the God of justice jumping on it with all their might. With all their hope.

Perhaps that's the place to pause today. More about Wink's discussion—and *how we jump*—next time.

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⁵⁹ There are multiple sources for this. I've found Marcus Borg particularly insightful and compelling—across all his writing, but most clearly presented here: *Jesus: A New Vision* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1987) and *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).

⁶⁰ www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kobayashi_Maru. Far be it from me to call Kirk a messianic figure, however he does seem to share with Jesus the confidence that there is no such thing as a no-win scenario.

⁶¹ www.theshalomcenter.org/content/god-caesar-image-coin. There's *a lot more* going on here than I discuss above.

⁶² Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be* (NY: Doubleday, 1998), pp. 98-111.

Resilience – and Jesus’ Third Way

David R. Weiss – March 31, 2019

The Gospel in Transition #18 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

I closed my last essay with a reference to Walter Wink’s discussion of the largely unrecognized *radical* character of Jesus’ famous words about turning a cheek, giving a cloak, or walking an extra mile. I characterized them as exhortations to not simply trust in the long arc of the moral universe, but to *bend it* with nonviolent human action.⁶³ And I promised more about Wink’s discussion—and *how we jump*—in this next post. We still won’t quite make it to jumping today, but we’ll take a good look at Wink and see how he can help with resilience.

So let’s turn to the text in question (Mt 5:39-42 || Lk 6:29-30; Wink considers Matthew’s version closer to Jesus’ original words than Luke’s). For two millennia most Christians have likely presumed these verses either advocate a Christian pacifism that is impossibly perfect (beyond the reach of all but true saints)—or they advise an unpromising *passivism* that sees virtue in simply accepting whatever ill-treatment other persons or social systems throw our way. Wink says it’s neither of these, and he’s adamant that the wisdom in these verses offers us a measure of revolutionary savvy that is as crucial today as it was for Jesus’ first listeners.

Each of the three situations Jesus mentions was an occasion, easily imaginable for his hearers, for humiliation by someone with greater power. When he refers to being struck on the *right* cheek (Mt 5:39b) he’s discussing a back-handed slap by a right hand wielded by someone in power (master, husband, Roman) to put a person of lesser status in their place (slave, wife, Jew). Such a strike was not meant to cause outward injury but public and inward humiliation: to re-inscribe the lines of domination in the relationship. It could *only* be administered with the right hand (and *only* to the right cheek) because only that hand could uphold one’s honor. The left hand was reserved—by indelible cultural-religious tradition among both Jews and Romans—for “unclean” tasks like cleaning oneself after using the toilet. It was *socially impossible* to conceive of using one’s left hand to assert dominance.

Thus, when Jesus instructs his hearers to “turn the other cheek” he *isn’t* counseling them to submit to humiliation. He’s inviting them *to turn the tables*. Because to offer the other cheek (the *left* cheek) is to say, “My dignity is not yours to take.” And while the left hand is utterly unavailable for use by the person in power, to use the right hand to now strike the left cheek is a movement that *confers* equality—and the recipient’s right to self-defense, perhaps even retaliation. This remark by Jesus is ripe with wisdom for exercising dignity and self-worth in the face of a dehumanizing system. *And we mostly never knew.*

Jesus continues, “If someone seizes your coat, give them your cloak as well” (Mt 5:40). As Wink discusses, the Hebrew Bible provides several references to the rights of creditors over those in debt to them. If a debtor is too poor to offer anything of real value to secure a debt, the creditor may claim the debtor’s outer garment as “collateral,” though he must return it *each night* so the debtor can use it as a blanket against the cold. With no material value, it’s an exercise in daily humiliation by one Jew against another, a public reminder of just who the “haves” and “have nots” are in the community.

However, in a culture where to see the nakedness of another was a powerful taboo—a transgression that shamed *the one viewing* far more than the one naked—Jesus tells poor debtors *to turn the tables*. If a creditor shows up in the morning to insist on claiming their collateral for the day—your outer garment (a claim that serves only to humiliate you), then strip yourself naked and offer *all* your clothes. The insufferable pettiness of such creditors will be revealed in their shame. Again, the words are about preserving dignity in a situation where it’s literally up for grabs. *And we mostly never knew.*

⁶³ Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (NY: Doubleday, 1998), pp. 98-111. This text offers a very accessible discussion of Wink’s more scholarly treatment in *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 175-193—itsself a chapter based on Wink’s exegetical analysis in “Neither Passivity nor Violence: Jesus’ Third Way,” *Forum* 7 (1991), pp. 5-28.

Finally, immediately after this (Mt 5:41) Jesus tells his listeners to “go a second mile” with anyone who asks them to walk a first one. But, critically, such a request was *never* made by just anyone. It was *exactly* the “request” that any Roman soldier could make of any civilian to “walk with them for one mile”—and carry their sixty-plus pound backpack as well. Jews were a frequent target of such requests, which were a weighty reminder of who represented the occupying force and whose land-culture-religion was occupied. Yet history also provides ample examples showing that Roman soldiers faced real disciplinary consequences for abusing the “one mile” limit to such requests.

Hence, under Jesus’ advice, the moment a Jewish person walks (with backpack) into that “second mile,” they’re absolutely NOT extending an extra kindness—they are, in fact, *turning the tables*. Now the soldier no longer holds power; in fact, he’s in very real danger of being disciplined himself. For a third time Jesus is advocating the exact opposite of quietly putting up with injustice. He’s offering suggestions for a nonviolent transformation of the world. *And we mostly never knew*.

In fact, this threefold set of teachings is introduced by the phrase, “Do not resist the one who does you evil” (Mt 5:39a), which Wink argues is an unhelpful translation. The Greek word behind “resist” literally means “stand against,” and it’s used most often to describe battlefield encounters: where soldiers “stand (violently) against” one another. So Jesus is really saying, “Do not *stand-against-with-violence* the one who does you evil.” Then he proceeds to offer examples of just how one might *stand-against-WITHOUT-violence* the one who does them evil. Wink describes this as Jesus’ Third Way. In a world—from Jesus’ day to ours—where options in conflict scenarios between unequal powers are often reduced to “fight or flight,” *Jesus offers a Third Way*. A way that preserves—and amplifies—one’s dignity and thereby aims to transform the dynamics of a no-win scenario into a moment with breathing space ... and fresh potential.

And that’s precisely what Transition communities aim to do. The “governing” (political, corporate, and cultural) forces around us—from fossil fuel industries to corporate lobbyists, bought-up politicians, and deep-seated and long-cultivated personal habits—all exercise inordinate power over our day-to-day choices and jeopardize our long-term future. We cannot wait for their permission to act differently. We must, in effect, borrow our authority from the future.⁶⁴ Once we can see which direction the arc of the moral universe *must* bend (think slavery, women’s rights, civil rights, LGBTQ rights, human rights, etc.), *our task is to bend the arc*. Borrowing authority from the future and jumping on that arc with all our might.

Jesus’ words encourage us today to resist those powers that threaten life and dignity *actively, nonviolently, and creatively*. This will sometimes involve saying “No!” with words, votes, and bodies to policies and projects that threaten Earth’s wellbeing. As we engage in acts of resistance, we place ourselves in the company of the Hebrew prophets, countless Jewish martyrs, Jesus himself, and early Christians, all of whom knew that sometimes the affirmation of life begins with an emphatic, “No!” But just as importantly, other types of resistance say “Yes!” with words, votes, bodies—and especially as local communities—to patterns of life that find a Third Way forward, beyond what “permission” allows. *Those types of resistance are the soul of resilience*. We’ll consider what they might look like next time.

PS: I’ve set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you’ll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

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⁶⁴ I first heard this phrase from Amalia Vagts as she explained how Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries ordained LGBT persons for ministry without “permission” from the ELCA (pre-2009 policy change). Having prayerfully discerned the moral imperatives of the moment, she stated calmly, “We borrow our authority from the future.” Amen.

Resilience – Bending the Arc

David R. Weiss – April 4, 2019

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Today I want to conclude my thoughts (begun in [Essay #17](#)) on the fourth core insight of the Transition Movement: that we should (1) enliven imagination, (2) tap into deep agency, (3) reclaim and share earthbound skills ... (4) *without waiting for permission from the “governing” (political, corporate, and cultural) forces around us.*⁶⁵ These forces are so entangled with profit and/or power that they’re NOT going to offer permission, let alone support for us as we make the changes that are necessary for a transition away from fossil fuel intensive living. But we *must* transition—and quickly.

Moreover, the Transition Movement asserts that the transition needed is actually life-giving as well. Profits may suffer, power may be less concentrated, but life—that will be richer ... more *abundant*, as Jesus called it. And I argued across my last two essays that Jesus, in fact, teaches about acting for good without waiting for permission—even when such actions are outright (and creatively) subversive of the status quo. I described what Walter Wink calls Jesus’ “Third Way”⁶⁶ (an option beyond “fight or flight”) as a way that preserves—and amplifies—human dignity, transforming the dynamics of a no-win scenario into a moment with breathing space ... and fresh potential. And I suggested it invited us to not simply trust in the long arc of the moral universe, but to *bend it* with our own action.

As we face climate change—and systemic forces that constrain our options and obstruct our capacity for social transformation—besides imagination, energy, and skill, we must create moments with breathing space and fresh potential. And that’s precisely what Transition communities aim to do. Moving with cheerful(!) energy away from a carbon-intensive society, they are localized invitations to jump on that long arc of the moral universe—believing that its arc is not inevitable but the result of concerted communal choice. This is NOT to suggest that God is indifference to the universe’s moral character, but that *God counts on those who bear God’s image to play a decisive role in shaping God’s universe for good.*

But how? While this *will* (absolutely) sometimes involve saying “No!” to policies and projects that threaten Earth’s wellbeing (and hopefully doing so with creative gusto and fierce resolve), *the defining resilience* of Transition Movement is its creative gusto in saying “Yes!” to patterns of life that bend the arc toward a more sustainable, regenerative flourishing of life. Transition also regards wisdom as necessarily local, contextual, so it doesn’t offer definitive answers to how any given community might bend the arc. (And I’m also no expert, merely a fellow traveler along the way.) But I can offer some examples.

Transition Movement focuses on neighborhood connections, making a secular affirmation of Jesus’ pronouncement that the Kin-dom of God⁶⁷ is at hand—near enough to touch ... *perhaps waiting only upon our linked arms to burst into full bloom.* Since I’m writing for faith communities, I want to suggest ways for churches, which may not have a neighborhood-based membership but *do* have reservoirs of deep social bonds, to exercise the “Yes!” at the heart of resilience. Transition is rooted in learning the skills to live more lightly on the planet in community because that communal aspect not only stretches the reach of all the learning, it also activates joy and hope. Thus, the goal is precisely NOT to encourage these as individual endeavors but as opportunities to *mutually* build community and deepen planetary kinship ... even reverence for creation.

⁶⁵ As identified by Rob Hopkins and Sarah McAdams in “The Transition Movement: Past, Present, and Future,” roundtable discussion, 2018 Transition US 10th Anniversary Online Summit: www.transitiongathering.org/videos.

⁶⁶ Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (NY: Doubleday, 1998), pp. 98-111. This text offers a very accessible discussion of Wink’s more scholarly treatment in *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 175-193.

⁶⁷ Jesus, of course, says “Kingdom,” but kings are a distant abstraction for us, and he actually means something close to kin-dom in that God’s gospel activity is expressed in deepening the embrace of kinship in all directions.

Here are several ideas of where to start.⁶⁸

Food. Imagine conversations *and* group activities that foster confidence *and* fellowship around growing food, buying local/organic, supporting farmer’s market/CSA’s, moving toward plant-rich diets, eating seasonally, reducing food waste, canning/freezing for food storage, or using permaculture in home gardening/landscaping. Some of these could (should!) culminate in actual shared meals.

Housing. Conversations and group activities can foster confidence, fellowship, and change around energy efficient light bulbs, basic home weatherization (which *could* involve sharing how you adjust seasonal clothing choices before you adjust thermostats!), insulation, and energy efficient appliances. Trade experiences or aspirations for living in closer community: denser housing, co-housing, even communal homes. Some of these are “costly”; others are inexpensive and repay their investment quickly. The point is to actively share knowledge/skill *and take the responsibility within our reach for the lives we live.*

Transportation. Conversations and group activities can foster confidence, fellowship, and effect real change in how we move ourselves around. Creating car pools for church events—perhaps tracking this as a community challenge. Offering learning opportunities in using mass transit, from reading bus/train schedules to finding route connections to even making groups rides so that anyone who wants can feel confident using mass transit. Creating (and celebrating) opportunities to bike and walk as alternatives with side benefits of personal health and company. Maybe skills sharing in basic bike repair.

Waste. Conversations and group activities can foster confidence, fellowship, and effect real change in how we refuse, reuse, reduce, recycle, and rot (compost) our waste. There are zero-waste initiatives and recycling classes that can inspire and teach us a lot. Ending the ease with which we toss what we don’t want in the garbage is *an ecological, moral, spiritual imperative*—and by pursuing it as an act of communal learning, hemmed in by humility and seasoned with joy, we can go farther than as individuals.

Finally, imagine framing all of these activities—on each occasion—with prayer or other simple rituals that link this learning to our desire to care for the planet by living lightly upon it, our gratitude for Earth’s bounty, our hope to keep “home” in ways that align with Earth as our wider home. Imagine lifting up these efforts regularly (habitually!) in our communal worship as holy pursuits ... *as holy habits.*

None of these things are nearly so daunting as the challenges to which Jesus offered his Third Way. Or are they? We’ve brought our entire ecosystem planet to a point of genuine peril by not facing them sooner. The forces that limit not only our choices, but also our imaginations are far more daunting than we want to admit. Our hearts and minds are *occupied* by forces that count on our complicity as they sell off our children’s future (and so much more). Saying “Yes!” to new patterns such as I suggest above will not come easily, which is why the communal and worshipful aspects are so essential.

And why the resulting joy is such good news. In fact, perhaps it is not so much the jumping itself but more precisely the union of *seeking justice while generating joy* that is able to actually bend the arc.

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⁶⁸ <http://transitionstreets.org/> offers a curriculum that guides small groups through practical learning toward Transition. It could be used “off the shelf” within faith communities, though I believe framing it explicitly within a faith narrative will greatly deepen its impact when used by groups for whom a faith narrative is key in life meaning.