

Editor's Note: Rory Noland is a composer and songwriter who has joined the Transforming Center team to help us continue to cultivate worship experiences that open us to God's transforming presence. In 2005 he completed the two year Transforming Community experience and articulates in this article some of the basic components of transformational worship that we experience when we are on retreat together.

Transformational Worship: Encountering God in Ways that Change Us

By Rory Noland

“To stand before the Holy One of eternity is to change.” Richard Foster ¹

The book of Matthew ends triumphantly. Jesus has conquered death and risen from the grave. Just before ascending into heaven, Jesus calls his disciples together for one last meeting. “Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him...” (Matthew 28:16-17).

The disciple's response to the resurrected Christ was a natural one—they bowed down in worship before him. However, there is an eerie twist to the story. After reporting that the disciples worshiped Christ, Matthew adds three bone chilling words, “...but some doubted.”

These three words confront us with a disturbing reality. Face to face with the glory of Christ and in the midst of worshiping him---some still doubted. Perhaps it wasn't just Jesus they were doubting. Maybe they doubted their ability to go on without him, as I'm sure many of us would have if we had been in their place. But the fact remains that this momentous worship experience was not enough to assuage their doubts and fears. It was not enough to change them. The disciples' experience raises a sobering question: How often do we come away from the most meaningful times of worship completely unchanged?

The Role of Worship in Spiritual Formation

The possibility of engaging in worship but not being changed by it reminds me of what I like to call “neutrino worship.” In physics, a neutrino is a subatomic particle, smaller than a neutron, which carries no electrical charge or measurable mass. Because it is electrically neutral, a neutrino is able to pass through solid matter without being affected. In the same way, we often let worship pass over us without allowing it to shape our behavior. Worship is reduced to a feel-good experience rather than a life-changing encounter with Christ.

Unfortunately, too many Christians have a narrow view of worship. Often worship gets reduced to singing catchy little tunes in church or it is merely an emotional experience that leaves us momentarily inspired. In Romans 12:1-2, Paul connects the “spiritual act of worship” with transformation and the renewing of our minds. And in II Corinthians 3:18 he teaches us that when we behold or contemplate God’s glory, we are “transformed into his likeness.” Therefore, worship is so much more than an emotional “feel good” experience. It is more than a program at church or a concert by a favorite worship leader. Worship is also participatory. It is not something done to me by a worship band. In fact, worship is not about me at all; worship is all about God. And if we allow it, worship can transform us.

Worship awakens a desire to change by challenging our spiritual status quo. Certain hymns and praise choruses, when taken seriously, are guaranteed to rock your boat. Who can sing the classic hymns *I Surrender All*, *Have Thine Own Way*, or *All for Jesus* without fully considering the implication of those words?

Worship challenges us to take an honest look within. As Howard L. Rice describes, facing one’s moral shortcomings is never easy: “God requires honesty from us, and such honesty can be painful. Because God knows us better than we know ourselves,

pretending will not work. God's knowledge of us demands that we come to terms with who we really are."²

During worship recently I ran across a couple lyric lines that stopped me dead in my tracks. The first line read, "...the power of your love is changing me." While singing that line, I had to ask myself, "Is that true of me? Is God's love really changing me?" Another line stated, "Your grace is enough for me," which prompted me to ask, "Is God really all I need to be happy or am I seeking happiness and fulfillment in temporal things?" I didn't come to those questions on my own. Worship brought them to the forefront.

Worship also affirms our intentions to obey God. Spiritual formation is something God initiates and does in us (Philippians 1:6; 2:13). However, it is our responsibility to co-operate with his work in our lives. Worship songs emphasizing faith and commitment give voice to our intentions to follow Christ.

Very often the Holy Spirit uses worship to convict us of sin. One time I was embroiled in a sticky relational conflict with a brother in Christ. However, I was absolutely convinced I was right and that he was completely wrong. Then I came to church. During the first song, we were invited to "humble yourself before the Lord." The next song proclaimed that God "graciously forgives sinners such as I." Needless to say, I was immediately convicted of my pride and arrogance, and realized that my stubbornness was preventing reconciliation. The next morning I apologized and made amends.

Worship that Transforms

At the Transforming Center, many of us are being drawn to a style of worship befitting

our community---one that is inherently transformational. Specifically, I would describe our worship as prayerful, truthful, and beautiful.

Prayerful

Borrowing elements from Taize and other monastic communities, our worship is, first of all, contemplative---incorporating periods of silence for reflection, listening, and communing with God. For that reason, the music we sing is relatively simple, uncluttered by too many words. The songs are also somewhat repetitive, allowing the words to wash over us and speak deeply to our hearts. We read portions of Scripture, allowing the words to penetrate our souls. In this way, we participate in the communion of saints by praying some of the oldest prayers of the church, including the Psalms.

Even though our worship is meditative that does not mean that it is not passionate and celebratory. We worship the Lord wholeheartedly, with joy and thanksgiving.

Truthful

The songs we sing may be simple, but they are not simplistic. The liturgy and lyrics are Scriptural, sometimes verbatim, and always expressing the ancient and profound truths of the Christian faith. The words we read and sing not only express biblical truth, but also the truth about our journey deeper into relationship with God. We do not shy away from acknowledging the fact that sometimes the journey is hard and difficult. Our worship allows us to be honest, vulnerable, and transparent with each other and with God and to allow God to meet us right where we are in ways that could not be humanly orchestrated.

Beautiful

Lastly, our worship seeks to reflect the beauty of the Lord---his holiness, majesty, and love---as well as the beauty of God's people dwelling together in unity. As God's image bearers, we acknowledge our responsibility to bring beauty to a desperate and needy world. Part-singing, for example, is encouraged not just for beauty's sake, but also as an expression of the community we share as brothers and sisters growing in Christ. Religious symbols and art draw our souls into that beyond-words place of communion with God.

Many these days are hungry for worship that moves us deeply, touches us completely, and ultimately transforms us. At Transforming Center retreats we continue to craft prayer and worship experiences that open us to life-changing encounters with Christ. Please join us as we journey into the exciting world of transformational worship.

¹ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth, 20th Anniversary Edition* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), p. 173.

² Howard L. Rice, *Reformed Spirituality: An Introduction for Believers* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), p. 198.

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