

A Heart of Stone to a Heart of Flesh: Experiencing Transformation in Community

Tom Boyle

*“I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them;
I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh
...then they shall be my people, I will be their God.”*
Ezekiel 11:19

When I was first invited to join in the Transforming Community experience, I thought the description “Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership” was a bit of an oxymoron. I could imagine strengthening the “mind” of my leadership, but where did this soul thing fit into leadership?

You see, I come from the intellectual world and that world has always been my comfort zone. I spent 9 years in college, 25 years on a University campus as a member of the faculty and administration, and then this past 9 years with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. I lived out of a theology that said I needed to work hard to please God. If anyone had taken time to point this out, I would have denied that I believed this way, but it was still true. I behaved as though working hard to produce more right action plus less wrong behavior equaled godliness. Sin was something to be managed, kept at bay, always pushed to the edges. It was all about getting one’s mind around the problem and solving the problem. Godliness was something that I achieved (or pretended to) with my good efforts and I was motivated by right thinking.

Shortly after our first retreat, I was given a vivid picture of what God had in mind for me. It was a startling and very real dream. I was seated on the ground and I was focused on a cluster of “things” in front of me that kept trying to move away. As each would move away, I would gather it back with my hands, and try to keep it close. The process seemed endless.

After some time, I became aware of Jesus seated in front of me. He was there quietly waiting for me to be ready. When I looked into his eyes, there was no condemnation, no impatience, only love and acceptance. The things in front of me ceased to be significant and, as he looked at me with love in his eyes, he carefully reached into my chest and with his left hand removed a heart of stone. In his right he held a fleshly, beating heart, and he inserted it into me, replacing the heart of stone. All the while he kept staring at me with love in his eyes so that I knew I did not need to be afraid.

To characterize that as a startling view of myself is a serious understatement. It both shook me and encouraged me. Through the Transforming Community experience it has become clear to me that what I really need to do is to trust God. I need to trust myself to God and others in the safety of this community. Humility is not something to be conceptualized and affirmed in my mind, but is something to be embraced and experienced. I need to trust God that He has dealt with my sin once and for all, and it is not something for me to work hard at “managing.” The fruit of that trusting process, ironically, is the very godliness that I thought I was producing before. I have at last discovered how God intends for me to please him, facing my sin squarely with Jesus at my side, trusting that He had dealt with my sin once and for all.

In this process I have also learned to tell the difference between my authentic and adaptive self. This has been intriguing, challenging and also very humbling. It has, at times, been a very bumpy ride. It has been painful both in my life and in my spirit. I have been embarrassed more than once at how foolish I had been or was being. I saw that my instincts were seemingly to always make simple things complex rather than hearing the simple words of love that God offered. How could it possibly be that simple when I had struggled for so long?

In a word, it has been a transforming experience to spend two years journeying with other leaders and learning to trust myself to them. I owe a tremendous debt to 18 dear people who pray for me and for whom I pray. They have truly been a transforming community for me and I cannot imagine the last few years without this group of people knowing me and praying for me. They have been a lifeline, a safe harbor, an expression of God's love to me that I cannot begin to describe. I cannot imagine life ahead of me without pursuing the heart of God, trusting Him with me and my future. I long for God to complete that work that He has taken up within my heart and I know that being willing to enter into community with other leaders has been a key to God's transforming work in my life.

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