
Frederic Henry Hedge
The Transfiguration: A Sermon (1838)

What exactly is Transcendentalism? One view is that at the center of Transcendentalism is a class of inner experiences that involve what we might call the higher mind. These experiences are typically brief, but they leave a lasting impression. A precise explanation and analysis of them is difficult because we lack a satisfactory vocabulary, and perhaps also because they involve a dimension of our being that is outside, beyond, or beneath our rational mind. The following sermon by the Unitarian minister Frederic Henry Hedge (1805–1890), a friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson and a founding member of the Transcendental Club, perhaps comes as close as anything in the Transcendentalist literature to describing these transcendental experiences.

To frame the discussion, Hedge alludes to the Transfiguration of Jesus (Matthew 17:1–9; Mark 9:2–8; Luke 9:28–36), the incident where Jesus and three disciples climbed a high mountain and the disciples saw Jesus "transfigured before them; and his face did shine as the sun, and his garments became white as the light." Hedge sees in this a symbolic reference to a class of religious or aesthetic experiences in which the world seems suddenly transfigured, so that, for example, we may become aware of a spiritual meaning to the material world, a special radiance or divinity of objects or people, or a deep relationship between us and Nature. The same is true, Hedge explains, with our inner vision: there are moments of 'spiritual exaltation', epiphanies, when we discern elements of our spiritual and moral nature with heightened acuity.

"AND after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James and John his brother, and bringeth them up into a high mountain apart, and was transfigured before them, and his face did shine as the sun and his garments were white as the light." (Matthew, xvii. 12)

[1] The transfiguration of Christ is to be regarded rather as an event in the lives of the disciples who witnessed it, than as an event in the life of the Saviour himself. It was an effect produced on their minds, and not any thing which essentially affected his condition. He needed no such outward sign to assure him of that divine nature to which his own consciousness bore unceasing testimony far stronger than any outward sign could supply; but it was necessary that their minds should be quickened and elevated beyond the ordinary reach of human vision and human experience, in order that they might fully apprehend the glorious character and the glorious destiny of their master. Therefore, though this miracle considered in itself, i.e. as a preternatural occurrence, and viewed both in respect to the evidence upon which it rests and the inferences of divine power, and a divine purpose which it warrants, stands on precisely the same ground as the other miracles; yet, it has, when viewed more nearly, an aspect peculiar to itself. It appears then not as a miracle wrought upon Jesus, but as a miracle wrought upon those three who were with Jesus in the mount as witnesses of his glory. I do not mean that the change which is described as having taken place in the person of the Saviour was not an actual occurrence, that the phenomenon had no existence except in the minds of the spectators, but that the phenomenon is chiefly important when considered in reference to them—it was what passed in their vision rather than what passed in the person of Jesus with which we are concerned.

[2] Considered in this point of view the transfiguration is an event not wholly unparalleled in human experience. Something similar in kind, though different in mode and degree, has occurred to most, perhaps to all of us. Has it never occurred to you, that a friend whom you have long known, and loved, and revered, has at some moment of deeper emotion and more intimate communion, appeared to you in new manifestations, shining with a glory which he had never yet exhibited, which you had never conceived him capable of exhibiting—his whole nature exalted, every faculty ennobled, every affection more intense, every virtue more refined, every word more quickened and quickening, until you imagined the very fashion of his countenance to be altered, and could almost persuade yourself that you stood in the presence of a superior being? For so it is in all our intercourse in this world; even with those of our most intimate acquaintance, we can never acquire that perfect intimacy which belongs to a more perfect state.

[3] We can never see and know them as they are. We are divided from them by an impenetrable veil of flesh, and only at rare intervals and favorable moments are we permitted to catch a glimpse of the spirit that dwells within. But not to insist on this personal transfiguration, there is another phenomenon in human experience to which the occurrence related in the gospel more nearly corresponds. There are moments in the life of every reflective mind when all things appear to us in a new and clearer light, when the whole scheme and every purpose of our being is made plain. The feature is unrolled before us like a chart, in which our own destiny, traced in lines of light, beckons us on beyond the kingdoms of the world. The truths which are to guide, the works which are to occupy, the trials which are to perfect, the harvests which are to crown us, are all comprehended in a single glance; the visible world around us, the invisible world around that, and God who is around all are brought nearer to us—we feel that they are of us and we of them—parts of the same whole. We are made sensible of the mysterious affinity, the more than affinity, the perfect oneness which binds us to the universe and its author, and are dissolved together with them in conscious union. All that Christianity unfolds is then transfigured before us, and this transfiguration is of Christ, for it is only by and through him who is the informing word that such visions are vouchsafed to us. It is only at particular seasons and under particular circumstances, that this elevation of the soul can take place. They must be seasons of deep and intense excitement, supposing and requiring an unusual activity of thought and feeling. It was on a *mountain* apart that the disciples were gathered when they beheld the altered countenance of the Saviour. It is only when raised above the ordinary level of human life and human converse, that we can participate in like revelations.

[4] Not every excitement, however, can bring Christ, or the objects of Christianity transfigured before us. There is an excitement of the brain—there are moments of mental exaltation, in which the intellect is roused to higher efforts of creative power, and the understanding converses with the problems of science and the speculations of philosophy, as with familiar things—when imagination wanders amid shapes and deeds which eye hath not seen, ear heard, or the heart of man conceived—when fancy gathers into living pictures, and traces on airy tablets the colors and the forms of an ideal world. In such moments there is a glory and a joy, but it is of the earth, and Christ is not there.

[5] Again, there is an excitement of the heart: there are moments of rapturous emotion, when the whole frame is tremulous with deep feeling, and every pulse bounds with sensations which cannot be uttered, when affection is kindled into burning passion and every generous sentiment pants to express itself in generous action. This is a noble fervor but this is also earthly, and Christ is not there. And there is also a moral enthusiasm, more noble still; that virtuous passion kindled by the sight of earthly wrongs and earthly woes, under the influence of which a generous nature gives itself up to ceaseless toil and ceaseless sacrifice in the behalf of suffering humanity. Yet, even in this—though there is less in it of earth than of heaven—even in this the full glories of Christ are not apparent.

[6] That state of being which alone can bring Christ transfigured before us, is a general elevation of the whole spirit, differing from those partial excitements I have described, as the excitement of perfect health differs from the tumult of the senses when inflamed with wine. It is no turbulent emotion—no fever of the blood—no unnatural heat. It has nothing of the whirlwind or the tempest, but that repose which belongs alike to nature and to mind in their most healthy moods—the calmness of the sunshine—the tranquility of intense contemplation. The spirit absorbed in rapturous vision broods over the deep things of God—freed from the flesh it wanders unconfined in its native element. Earth's thousand voices are hushed and Christ is present in transfigured beauty. The great objects of his kingdom pass before us, no longer dim with earthly mists, but radiant with that pure light which flows directly from him the great Sun of Spirits.

[7] Again, it is evident that the season of transfiguration must be a season of retirement. Not in the crowded assembly, not in the deafening tumult of social intercourse, can the soul attain that force and clearness which lift us above the visible world, and bring us into communion with spiritual things. Three only of Christ's disciples — his most intimate companions — were made witnesses of his glory. It is only in private communion with those who are nearest to us in spiritual affinity, or in more private communion with that spirit who is nearer to us than any finite spirit can be — it is only at such moments that we can participate in the moral elevation I am describing. In addition to these requisitions there is required, moreover, a certain degree of moral purity, without which no converse with spiritual things is possible. Only the pure in heart, we are told can see God, and only they can see the things which pertain to the kingdom of God.

[8] Such then are the conditions under which Christ may become transfigured to any one of us. It has already been hinted in what this transfiguration consists — in a nearer and clearer presentation of the great objects of christianity. Foremost and chief among these objects are the facts of our religion. I mean those central and eternal facts which constitute the life of the christian scheme and the essence of all christian instruction — the existence of God, of a moral law, and an immortal state. It is not that these truths are never present to our minds, or are never understood in our ordinary moods. We do perceive them and know what they mean. We neither deny them with our lips nor doubt them in our hearts, but we have not that stirring sense, that living conviction of their reality, that full appreciation of their truth, which is given us in these more favored moments. They appear like the objects of nature, when seen under a clouded sky. They are visible enough — every outline is perfectly distinct — every hue is fully defined, but all is cold and dull, wanting that perfect illumination which gives not only light, but freshness and splendor and the glow of life to all that it touches. What these objects are when the sun again smiles upon them, such are the truths of religion when transfigured to us in a season of spiritual illumination. They seem to be new revealed — they have all the freshness which belongs to a new revelation. If before they were visible, now they are radiant and beaming with that divine intelligence from which they spring. If before they were familiar, now they are identified with our very being. If before they were intelligible, now they are become objects of consciousness; and whereas, before we saw them in the reflected light of our own understandings, we now see them, as it were, in the mind of God — their reality and their dread import are brought home to us with a vividness which makes us feel that they are the only realities which deserve the attention of an immortal being, and that this world has nothing else worth striving for or living for.

[9] Again, the transfiguration of Christ consists in a clearer exhibition of our duties, and a more powerful incitement to the faithful discharge of them. It is with our duties as we have just seen it to be with the truths of religion. We know that we are moral beings, that we have moral obligations—we know what we owe, and to whom. But what avails this knowledge, nay more, what avails it that we confess to ourselves that our only happiness lies in the faithful discharge of these obligations? This belief is compatible, and is often known to co-exist with an almost total indifference to the great principles and the tremendous fact

which it implies. Nothing in human nature is more wonderful than our capacity of disregarding that which most nearly concerns us, the things most essential to our happiness in time and eternity. It would seem incredible if it were not a matter of constant experience. If something similar were told us of the inhabitants of some distant land — if it were told us that there were countries where men are accustomed to build houses costly and laborious as if to endure forever, in such situations that they were annually swept away, when a different location, requiring no greater trouble, would ensure them permanence, we should count it fable; and yet the same thing is true of ourselves. A perception of our obligations and of the connection which exists between duty and happiness, is not sufficient, we need that conviction which no reasoning can create, that stimulus which no argument can supply. Such a conviction and such a stimulus are given us in those moments of spiritual exaltation, when our duties are not only exhibited to us, but exhibited in transfigured form, so that they no longer seem wearisome and painful but easy and pleasant — not only leading to happiness, but constituting happiness, the only happiness which seems to be worth pursuing. The way of righteousness is then revealed to us anew as the way of life and the path of peace — we are made to hunger and to thirst for it as the highest good, as an infinite good — sufficient for the life that now is and for every period of our being.

[10] Lastly, Christ is transfigured to us in our destiny. There are moments when that destiny is overcast, when the future has no charm for our imagination and no consolations for our hearts. There are moments when the whole scheme of life seems inextricably involved, and every purpose of our being is wrapped in thick darkness. The present is an intolerable burden and the future an undefined looking for of disappointment and woe. We wish not to live, and the thought of living forever fills us with loathing and dread, our hearts shrink with dismay from the awful responsibility of life, we are ready to fold our hands in despair, and to wish that we had never been born. Again there are moments gloriously contrasting with these seasons of gloom — bright moments of hope and rapturous expectation, when the cloud has passed away from our destiny, and not only so, but visions are vouchsafed to us — visions of blessedness to come, which raise us as far above the ordinary level of human joys as those seasons had depressed us. The future and all that awaits us throughout its whole immeasurable extent, our earthly and our immortal destination is exhibited in fresh and glowing colors, drawn from our relations to God and eternity. Life is presented to us more in that softened light which a pure faith can shed around all that God has willed, and the soul which we had thought almost to have lost in sin and sorrow is given us anew from the hands of our redeemer — an inestimable dower — a priceless gem inlaid with heavenly hopes and studded thick with the signs and tokens of everlasting promise. We feel that simply to be, is happiness enough; that in giving us existence God had given every thing which we could desire or need.

[11] These then are the elements which make up that spiritual transfiguration of which, like the favored disciples of old, we are sometimes permitted to partake in the course of our earthly service. The great central truths of religion, which are Christ himself speaking to us from his invisible kingdom, and with him Moses and Elias — the law of duty, and prophecies of glory and immortality — all combine to form one radiant image, one undivided impression — all unite to illustrate the glory of God and the destiny of man. These are points in our pilgrimage when we feel with the Apostles that it is good to be there, and we would fain build tabernacles to fix and perpetuate the fleeting visions which have there ministered to us. This may not be. These visions are fleeting as they are rare — lent but for a moment to warm and to cheer us; yet, if we seek to avail ourselves of the new life and renovated vigor with which they have inspired us, if we link with them resolutions of holy living and purposes of unceasing progress, which shall stand by us, and work with us in every trial, these moments will not have visited us in vain. The glory may pass away, the cloud may again overshadow us, but out of the cloud we shall hear the voice of God, still reminding us of the heavenly vision and saying, "This is my Beloved Son, hear ye him."

[12] Christian! if ever you have been thus visited, if ever you have been carried up to the mount of vision, if ever Christ has been transfigured before you, if ever you have gazed upon that face shining, as the sun, and that form clothed in garments white as the light, let it not be said that you have come down unaltered and unstrengthened in purpose or in deed. Forget not the excellent glory which was shown you in that high and holy place. Remember the things which you saw, and the voice which you heard. Let them be for a sign and for a covenant between your soul and God—a pledge of his love, an earnest of his kingdom, and an unfading memorial of the high calling with which he has called you.

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