

# The Arc of Imagination in Transformative Learning Theory

Logan C. Jones

In recent years the practice of CPE supervision has widened to include more adult education theory than previously. No longer is pastoral supervision anchored solely in a psychiatric model of supervision. Our theory and understanding of how students learn has deepened and has become more rich and varied. Certainly the great classics from the 1960s and 1970s like Thomas Klink's article "Supervision," Rudolf Ekstein and Robert Wallerstein's *The Teaching and Learning of Psychotherapy*, and Bill Mueller and William Kell's *Coping with Conflict* should continue to be studied and utilized.<sup>1</sup> They are too important to discard. Concepts like cross-grained experience, parallel process, learning problems, problems about learning, and anxiety-avoiding, anxiety-binding, and anxiety-approaching behaviors are foundational to the clinical method of learning.

One of the current adult education theories gaining traction in supervisory practice is that of transformative learning theory. This article will review the basic texts of the theory as they relate to the CPE process, then discuss some of the nuances of the theory, and finally explore how the imagination thickens the clinical learning process.

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## OVERVIEW OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY

Transformative learning theory, also known in the adult education literature as transformation theory, is essentially about the process of making meaning. The theory is concerned with how meaning is made out of experiences and, at the same time, how experiences are interpreted to make meaning. In other words, transformative learning theory is about how we, as adults, understand and interpret the many varied experiences that make up our lives and the worlds in which we live and move and have our being. Jack Mezirow defines transformative learning as “the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally able to change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action.”<sup>2</sup> Patricia Cranton, among others, notes that our taken-for-granted frames of reference are often rigid, formed and shaped by family, social, and cultural expectations. Since we rarely critically question the assumptions that form how we see and experience the world, our frames of reference can be problematic and, therefore, limited and limiting.<sup>3</sup>

We all have particular ways of making meaning of the world and our experiences in it. Life is comfortable when our experiences line up with our expectations. The world is predictable and our footing firm. However, we all know life does not stay comfortable and predictable. Things happen. Our world and our expectations get turned upside down through what transformative learning theory calls *disorienting dilemmas*, events that are epochal and also cumulative over time. These are the experiences that clash with our worldview and assumptions. We are thrown into turmoil. Nothing makes sense. How we understand the world psychologically, socially, and theologically is threatened. We would prefer the world stay the same rather than being made new. The pull of the flesh pots of Egypt is seductive.

Students in CPE experience this kind of turmoil. Encounters with the living human documents often leave them reeling emotionally, spiritually, and theologically. The easy theological world of the academy crashes on the rocks of grief and pain at the bedside. When we are faced with disorienting dilemmas, we have two choices. One is to reject outright the unexpected experience through some sort of coping mechanism like denial, resistance, or repression. We hang on to our worldview at all costs. We defend at all hazards. As the poet W. H. Auden says,

We would rather be ruined than changed.  
 We would rather die in our dread  
 Than climb the cross of the moment  
 And let our illusion die.<sup>4</sup>

The other choice is to take the risk of opening ourselves up to the new experience and begin the process of critically questioning and reflecting on our unexamined assumptions and beliefs. Imagination can help us in this liminal space. Can we imagine a new perspective? Can we imagine a new understanding and a new way of being? Can our imagination lead us to more awareness, more acceptance, more hope, more wholeness? Cranton writes, "When people critically examine their habitual expectations, revise them, and act on the revised point of view, transformative learning occurs."<sup>5</sup>

As human beings, we are meaning-seeking and meaning-creating. We live as meaning-hungry creatures. We want our experiences to have meaning; we want our lives to be meaningful. The search for meaning is fundamental to our nature. It is essential and non-negotiable to who we are. The major concepts of transformative learning theory, such as change, meaning, interpretation, and perspective, are not new. These concepts are not unique to adult education. They are, in fact, often found in other disciplines. For instance, change and making meaning are essential parts of the psychotherapeutic process.<sup>6</sup> The activity of interpretation plays a major role in the theology and pastoral counseling of John Dominic Crossan and Charles Gerkin, respectively.<sup>7</sup> Carrie Doehring looks at the meaning of pastoral care through the lens of modernism and postmodernism.<sup>8</sup> Even traditional Western medicine in all its different forms wrestles with the concept of meaning as it relates to the understanding and interpretation of illness.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke evokes the making of meaning in his powerful, simple poem, "O Herr, gib jedem seinen eignen Tod." He writes, or prays, it seems:

God, give us each our own death,  
 the dying that proceeds  
 from each of our lives:  
 the way we loved,  
*the meanings we made,*  
 our need.<sup>10</sup> (*italics added*)

As a comprehensive theory of adult learning, transformative learning is not limited to the bright hallways of the academy. It is applicable—and meaningful—to our clinical method of learning in the swampy, chaotic lowlands of CPE. The challenge for us as CPE supervisors and CPE students is

to use our imagination to form and transform our pastoral identities, pastoral competencies, and pastoral functioning. Our hearts are needed as much as our heads.

### THE MAJOR TEXTS

The literature on transformative learning theory can be overwhelming. I suggest the best way to get introduced to the theory is to read a text on general adult education and learning. *Learning in Adulthood* by Sharan Merriam, Rosemary Caffarella, and Lisa Baumgartner, published in 2007, is such a text.<sup>11</sup> This is a comprehensive guide to adult learning. It is wide-ranging and expansive. Adult learning is placed in a broad context where issues such as the learning environment, technology, formal and informal programs, and the reality of adult learning are at play. The core of the book focuses on different learning theories and models, for example, the concept of andragogy, self-directed learning, and experiential learning. A student in supervisory CPE can find different theories and concepts of adult learning and begin to hone in on a theory for themselves. Be forewarned: There is a lot to grasp.

The chapter on transformative learning sits within this overarching context. Merriam and her colleagues begin by reviewing different perspectives through which the theory can be conceptualized. This is important for it places the different streams of the theory in theoretical perspective. The student is then challenged to begin his or her process of critical reflection on the theory from both the individual and social perspectives. Next, the major concepts of experience, critical reflection, and development are discussed. Finally, continuing issues and trends are highlighted. Merriam and her colleagues provide a solid, broad overview of transformative learning. One can grasp the concepts of the theory without getting lost. The chapter is clear and succinct. It provides the structure for further reading and will help anchor further understanding.

With this broad overview of the theory in hand, one can then move on to Mezirow's groundbreaking 1991 text, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, which is the first major text on the transformative learning theory.<sup>12</sup> Mezirow presents how he understands the dynamics through which we make meaning of our experiences. It is clear that the making of meaning lies at the core of transformative learning theory. Critical reflection here will reveal that Mezirow's conceptualization is based in intellect and

rational thought. This text can be quite dense and ponderous in places. For instance, Mezirow gives the reader a heavy dose of philosophy and linguistics as related to adult learning. Thus, this text is heavily weighted toward the scholarly aspects of transformative learning theory. The impact of emotions on the learning process is addressed briefly (the understanding of the affective aspects of transformative learning emerged after the publication of this text). *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* provides a deep, thorough understanding of the theory; it should not be read lightly. In fact, it should not be missed.

Mezirow and associates continue the development of the theory in *Learning as Transformation*.<sup>13</sup> This book, published in 2000, came out of the first-ever national conference on transformative learning, which was held in 1998. Here, fifteen scholars wrestle with the developing concepts related to the theory, critiquing and challenging the theory. The core concepts are discussed as well as areas that need more theoretical attention. Of particular importance is Mezirow's chapter entitled "Learning to Think Like an Adult."<sup>14</sup> He succinctly summarizes the theory, and again, the process of making meaning is at the forefront. The first section of the book focuses on developing concepts like the constructive-developmental approach, understanding feminist perspectives on learning, and the larger social and ideological implications of the theory. The second section explores the actual practice of transformative learning. Here, one gets to see how the theory unfolds in different settings and contexts. In this way, the theory is thickened and made more nuanced.

In 2006, Patricia Cranton wrote the next major text on transformative learning theory, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning*. Cranton offers a solid description of transformative learning theory and of how such learning is experienced from the learner's perspective, and she gives different strategies for promoting transformative learning. She draws on the most recent scholarship and in doing so pushes the theory forward, especially in the areas of imagination, spirituality, and the significance of affect and emotions in the learning process. Cranton's work is the most accessible presentation of the theory. Her work, while comprehensive and grounded, is more practical, more readable, and more readily translated into the CPE process than the earlier books mentioned. Mezirow's texts, for example, are located in a more academic and theoretical perspective. A student who delves deeply into Mezirow will certainly have a solid handle on the rational aspects of the theory but will find Cranton's writing more integrated

and more holistic. I recommend *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning* as the primary text on the theory. A third edition of the text is scheduled to be published in late summer 2016.

Finally, all of the theoretical development, research, and current issues in practice are captured in Edward Taylor, Patricia Cranton, and Associates' *The Handbook of Transformative Learning*.<sup>15</sup> This volume addresses the theory in depth and in relation to many different aspects of research and practice. One can read as deeply and widely as desired here. The scope of the scholarship and the different perspectives is impressive. From an overview of the theory to a critique of research on emerging issues such as spirituality in learning, individual differences in learning, and differences in cultural learning, students can find the resources to improve their own understanding of transformation and change.

A careful reading of these major texts shows an emphasis on rational thought, critical reflection, and discourse. Although these aspects are important, there is more to transformative learning theory than this rational dimension. The affective dimension of learning also has to be taken into account. Learning in CPE is much more than learning skills from a rational mode—it necessarily involves emotions and affect. This is the only way an effective pastoral identity is forged.

To this end, the student needs to further explore this affective dimension of learning to order to make transformation more complete. Robert Boyd and Gordon Myers offer a different understanding of transformative learning than Mezirow. In fact, they speak of transformative education rather than transformative learning.<sup>16</sup> Boyd and Myers make use of Jungian psychodynamic theory to further develop the sense of a meaningful integrated life. Concepts such as shadow, persona, archetypes, and Self are essential. Transformative education is more focused on the wholeness of life rather than a rational understanding of experience. This is a major difference. An understanding of transformative learning theory is incomplete without a reading of Boyd and Myer's article, "Transformative Education." It is that important.

Furthermore, the dynamics of grief play a central part in learning, change, and transformation in transformative education. When our worldview is challenged and changed, when our assumptions no longer hold, and when our understandings fail us, the appropriate and necessary response is grief—in all its messy manifestations. We are well aware in CPE that grief propels change. We see it at the bedside with patients. We feel it with stu-

dents as they try to make sense of their experiences. There is no escape. Grief is not rational, cannot be tamed by intellect, and will ultimately have its way with us. Grief is neither rational nor intellectual.

John Dirkx pushed the development of transformative learning further when he introduced the concept of soul. For Dirkx, soul is not just a theological concept. It is the means through which we make use of imagination, symbols, and emotions in our learning.<sup>17</sup> Dirkx argues that soul leads us to authenticity or, said another way, we connect head and heart, mind and emotion, darkness and light. By making use of symbols and imagination we open ourselves to learning about ourselves. The process of making meaning centers around the recognition of symbols and use of imagination. For Boyd and Myers and Dirkx, sifting through our emotions is critical to transformative learning. Transformative learning includes both the head and the heart, the intellect and the soul.

As a comprehensive theory of adult learning, transformative learning theory invites the student to wrestle not only with the intellectual foundations but the more mysterious soul aspects as well. The process of meaning-making involves our whole being. We cannot limit ourselves by relying solely on our rational capabilities. The challenge the theory places before us is to find ways to use our imagination to take us to worlds unknown, to be as open as we are able to embrace the mystery of life, and to honor the journey that is found in the CPE process.

#### THE ARC OF IMAGINATION

Encounters with the living human documents are often disorienting. We meet persons who are struggling, in pain, or keeping vigil for a loved one. We enter situations where few fear to tread. We are summoned to meet the mystery of chaos with the simple gift of ourselves, our souls, our imaginations. The trite reading of patronizing Scripture verses does nothing to ease grief and pain. More is required. I do not want a pastoral technician to visit me in the hospital; I want a person with soul, who is able to listen, who is able to sit quietly and humbly without having to anxiously cut and run. I want a person who has the imagination to help me find meaning.

How can imagination help us reconfigure the meaning of a disorienting experience? There is no one simple answer. We all have unique imaginations because we are unique persons. To enter into the imaginative world, we are asked to open our eyes in different ways, to open our hearts and let

in some pain. We are challenged to look beyond our old, tired assumptions about the world. We are invited to search for new meanings, new symbols, and new hopes. It is only our imagination that allows us to see how God is making all things new even when we would rather hang on to the familiar. Imagination—seeing and feeling larger—helps us feel the hope, however fleeting, of wholeness.

In CPE we ask students to trust the process. We ask them to trust us as supervisors, to trust the group, and to trust themselves. I often feel that by saying “Trust the process,” we are encouraging students to imagine the process, that is, to imagine the journey one step at a time towards a faraway, elusive promised land. We need our imagination to search for meaning, to create meaning, and to satisfy our hunger for meaning. Jungian psychotherapist and author James Hollis puts it succinctly: “Meaning makes a great many things enduring—perhaps everything.”<sup>18</sup> How else will we stumble through the pain we find at the bedside unless we can somehow summon our imagination as a way to meaning?

I recall a middle-aged woman I visited one time. She had terminal cancer; she was dying and she was angry because the cancer had been initially misdiagnosed. She had every reason to be angry. The first thing she said to me when I entered her darkened room was: What is heaven like? Of course, I stammered. I had no answer. So I asked her what she thought. This somehow led to conversation about her life, her daughter, her illness, and now her dying. Over the next several weeks as she was in and out of the hospital, our conversations always included her question. On her last admission, she told me that she had had to move in with her parents because she needed them to take care of her. She spoke of her mother cooking her favorite meals and how all the familiar smells would fill the house. She would sit in the kitchen as her mother cooked. Her father would take her outside in her wheelchair to sit under her favorite tree and watch the birds in the garden. I asked her how all this made her feel. She thought for a moment, then softly said it made her feel safe. She felt deeply loved amidst all the memories of her home. She felt at peace. Then, somewhere from my imagination, a gift perhaps, I replied that maybe this is what heaven is like. We sat quietly for a long while as she drifted off to sleep. That was our last conversation. She died that night. The meaning of home was the meaning of heaven for her. She made her meaning. I would like to think that somehow I helped.

The arc of imagination invites us to see more, to feel more, to be more, to live larger so that our pastoral care will be more soulful. Of course, the

meanings we make through our imagination come by way of our histories, our complexes, our narratives, our limits. Meanings are contested. There is not just one right answer. Imagination helps us look beyond the narrow confines of our assumptions. Jung says, "In the same way that the body needs food, and not just any kind of food but only that which suits it, the psyche needs to know the meaning of its existence—not just any meaning, but the meaning of those images and ideas which reflect its nature and which originate in the unconscious."<sup>19</sup>

Learning and finding meaning in CPE is not easy. In fact, the process can be quite disorienting, unlike any other learning experience the student may have had. The process of becoming a self-aware pastoral caregiver is more complex than learning a multiplication table or learning how to operate a machine. To move into the necessary affective dimension of transformative learning, students are invited—and challenged—to surrender. That is, students are asked to be willing to learn to surrender and, likewise, to surrender to learn. Said another way, students are given the opportunity to learn to let go and to let go in order to learn. In the CPE process, we are invited—and challenged—to let go of our unexamined assumptions and ways of understanding the world and to then image a process that offers a new way of being in the world. Of course, the letting go of our assumptions never happens without a fight. We hang on to what we know; paradoxically, learning in CPE propels us toward what we do not know. Learning in CPE asks us to make better use of our imagination.

It is our imagination that helps us live into our grief and pain rather than run away from it. It is our imagination that enables us to, however tentatively, hold on to our darkness as well as our light, believing that God is in both, that when God calls us, the call embraces both darkness and light. It is our imagination that helps us see beyond our shadow and our flaws so we can live into who we are and who we hope to be. It is our imagination that allows us to surrender the tight hold that shame claims on our lives. To think, see, and feel larger than shame means we are to surrender our need to hide. Instead of hiding, we are challenged to take the imaginative risk to be seen, to be heard, and to be known. In doing so, we confess honestly our failures and brokenness and then can freely receive the absolution of knowing we are forgiven and accepted. Imagination helps us find the mercy we all need.

Learning in CPE is difficult because the setting is difficult. Students are thrown into the fire where there are no easy, sure answers. The pain is

real. The grief is real. The disorientation is real. Uncertainty and not-knowing echo through the halls of the hospital, in seminars, and in supervision. Imagination is required more than ever in the face of what Hollis calls the Triple As: ambiguity, ambivalence, and anxiety.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, as difficult as the learning process is in CPE, it is equally as transformative and life-changing for both students and supervisors. Transformative learning theory gives the most accurate and compelling understanding of the learning process. It is important to remember, however, that the magic, miracle, and mystery of transformation are quietly found in our imagination. Imagination makes meaning possible. Imagination makes transformation possible.

#### NOTES

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