

Bishop Steven Charleston, a Choctaw Native American and an Episcopalian, writes eloquently about how he struggled to reconcile these two important pieces of his spiritual life. This readiness and reconciliation process is beautifully described in this book 'The Four Vision Quests of Jesus.' It's especially rewarding that I have the opportunity just now to study it with a group online.

In this particular work, he tells us about the ways that his Choctaw ancestors were able to add Christian ways of seeing God in creation to their own ancient views of the holy. They believed that it was the divine God from whose sacred thoughts all life began. He explains the Native American concepts of Vision Quests and connects those to four episodes in life of Jesus. Jesus was known to use climbing up mountains as part of his spiritual practice, and Charleston puts this transfiguration Gospel in the context of a vision quest. Jesus and a few friends climb up the steep Mount Tabor. Charleston says:

Jesus ... goes up to a high place, accompanied by his supporters, his three disciples, Peter, James, and John. He stands alone before God. A vision occurs, but this time one so powerful that his friends actually see it. The vision includes a voice, one that is audible to the disciples of Jesus.

On the Mesa of Transfiguration, the vast power of God was revealed to humankind. For one shining moment, we were allowed to glimpse into the mind that created the first thought of Creation. The complexity of that thought, its intricacies and balances, were beyond the scope of human reason. All we can do as Native American tradition tells us over and over is to stand in awe of the creation and marvel at how it works together, every piece and player finally tuned. Our vision must be like the Hopi vision, a view of the natural world as it is transfigured into the image of the one who made it.

There is a lot about seeing, about vision in this story. The disciples suddenly see Jesus as markedly changed. The man they follow and listen to more than likely wore clothes that on their cleanest day were a kind of dusty tan color, and his skin was likely a similar color to their own. Suddenly, his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Jesus looked completely different in those moments. Involved in a vision meant mostly for him as he moved closer to his end, but also watched by his three followers, Jesus was engaged in conversation with two mentors, Elijah and Moses.

Peter, on the same mountain, was suffused with desire to prolong the experience of glory, and saw a chance to go into planning mode. (I can completely relate to this mode!) We don't know how the other two reacted – until the voice of God was heard. Then all three of them were desperately afraid. This vision and the voice changed something essential, and when they had the nerve to stand up and move again, going back into what they may have thought was real life, they were changed. How they saw and understood Jesus and themselves was, in that moment, radically altered.

Episcopal priest Michael Marsh says this about this moment in the Gospel:

Listen to him. Be raised up. Do not be afraid. What if those words are holy wisdom for times of change? What if they are the means by which we step into our own transfiguration? Maybe it wasn't Jesus who changed on the mountaintop. Maybe it was Peter, James, and John. Maybe their eyes were opened and their seeing changed, so that everywhere they looked they saw "Jesus himself alone." Maybe they saw Jesus for the first time as he had always been.

Marsh continues: ***If that's true, and I believe it is, then it means that every change – whether good or bad, wanted or unwanted, joyful or sorrowful – is illumined with divine light and filled with God's presence.***

Bishop Charleston uses more storytelling about Hopi tribes to expand on this concept. He writes, in *The Four Vision Quests of Jesus*, about a time in the early 1600s during which Spaniards decided that the Hopi tribes must all be converted to Christianity. These peaceful farmers were brutally enslaved, tortured – literally beaten into submission in an effort to force them to give up and destroy their spiritual beliefs and symbols.

After years of trying to resist conversion, clinging to that which gave their tribal life and well-being meaning and hope, participating in worship in secret and doing so under threat of extreme punishment and starvation, the Hopi revolted. In order to bring back into balance a world that was thrown far off from what they knew and needed, they transformed their view of themselves from peaceful folks to rebels and fighters. Charleston describes this incredible and shocking revolt.

These men and women, renowned for their religion of peaceful coexistence, attacked and killed every Spanish settler they could find, including every priest and friar of the Catholic church. Once the killing was done, they dismantled the Catholic mission, tearing it down stone by stone, scattering the evidence of the Church until it was no longer visible. To put their actions into context, imagine the Amish suddenly going on a killing spree, massacring every Catholic they could find and tearing down their churches so that not even the foundations remained.

What could have provoked the peaceful Hopi into such an act of desperate vengeance? For centuries, these quiet people had remained passive preferring to move rather than fight, living on isolated mesa tops in the desert in order to avoid conflict with any neighbors. What had caused them to change? What had driven them to set aside their deepest spiritual beliefs?

Under the pressure of dehumanization, the Hopi reacted. They transformed themselves. They turned inside out, spiritually and became the antithesis of their own ideal. In a galvanizing moment, their religious vision went from one extreme to another, mutated by the chemistry of the human soul, which can endure heroically for the sake of a belief but also strike out viciously for exactly the same reason.

Their ancient and good way of life having been wrecked by the Spanish, something changed for the Hopi. Something vital was missing, and they needed to see themselves differently, to be transfigured in order to pull their world back into balance.

Like the Hopi tribes, we are right now pushed nearly to the breaking point. Humanity and the rest of creation is enduring untenable pressure. Dehumanization and mass shooting. Deforestation, floods and wildfires. Division and isolation when we most need unity. We live, most of us, in fear and pain – caused in part by outside forces and in part by our inability to imagine responding in any new way.

We are used to and so good at our perceptions. What if we are so attached to how we see ourselves that we cannot be anyone else?

What if we are so comfortable with what we are used to seeing, with the people we are used to looking at, that desperately needed change cannot happen? And if we keep refusing to change how we see Church, how we are seen as Church, how we see ourselves as Church, could that allow something essential in us to be killed? What if we need to see in a transfigured way in order to pull our world into balance? What if we cannot survive without radically changing the ways we perceive and respond to creation?

We have to transfigure and transform ourselves, must allow our faith communities to be transfigured, alight in God's love and glory and...perhaps to the exclusion of some rules and rubrics and traditions and comfortable practices. It sounds lofty and impossible at the same time. It is what we need and deserve – this allowing of holy, frightening and longed-for change.

I will leave you with the thoughts of Desmond Tutu on the matter:

As I sat quietly in the garden I realized the power of transfiguration—of God's transformation—in our world. The principle of transfiguration is at work when something so unlikely as the brown grass that covers our veld in winter becomes bright green again.

The principle of transfiguration says nothing, no one and no situation, is "untransfigurable". That the whole of creation, nature, waits expectantly for its transfiguration, when it will be released from its bondage and share in the glorious liberty of the children of God.

Listen to him. Get up. Do not be afraid.