

## **Knock, knock, knocking on heaven's door: spiritual transformation in a time of certainty**

Rev Stephanie Dowrick

*What follows is an edited and revised version of the talk I gave at the Common Dreams conference. I have chosen to retain a relatively informal mode because "transformation" always takes us beyond thinking from a safe distance and demands we risk opening our hearts.*

Spiritual transformation *is* what our lives are really all about. Why are we here? What are we here to learn? If we are spiritual beings on a human journey – as Teilhard de Chardin and many others have suggested – then the purpose of life is to discover what spiritual transformation actually means, and how to live it.

Spiritual transformation lets us discover the utter inevitability of our connections with all other living beings (and how that will affect our daily choices). It lets us discover the depth of our connection with the great Mystery that some of us call God, the dazzling interplay between the now and the Eternal Now. It lets us discover our own belonging.

So this topic really opens us up to the biggest possible questions: what is life for and what is my life for? And I want to start by suggesting that I would prefer to support your own inner spiritual enquiry than give you answers. Please think of anything I say as a hint or stepping-stone only.

But first I want to offer you a quote from a very great Sufi teacher, Hazrat Inayat Kahn, who brought a particularly beautiful and inclusive form of Sufism to the West. Not incidentally, he was a musician as well as a great spiritual teacher. He wrote: "Humankind thinks and acts according to the pitch to which the soul is tuned. The highest note one could be tuned to is the divine note and it is in that pitch, once you arrive at it, that you begin to express the manner of God in everything you do, a manner which is not only beautiful, but which is beauty itself."

The quote already sets the tone so beautifully: how are we allowing our souls to "tune" us? What are we paying attention to? What "choruses" are we constantly replaying? What is it that we routinely fall back on when thinking about those big questions of purpose, meaning – and the everyday actions and behaviour that flow from them? How do we express the "manner of God" in our daily living? Do we dare even think about that?

I chose "Knock, Knock, Knocking at Heaven's Door" as the title for this talk first because it uses humour to shift our thinking a little, but also because in

fact one of the things we are doing, with our spiritual efforts, is turning towards “heaven’s door” – “knocking” on the door to insight and illumination; the door that frees us from ignorance and misunderstanding. But where is it? Is it outside or inside? Is it “beyond” or close at hand? In an age of certainty, a high degree of uncertainty quickly seems desirable, leaving us open to transformation and to freshness in our choices. Yet we do best when we do have a sense of direction - in spiritual matters too. Less ignorance *now*, more insight and kindness *now*, seem highly desirable as goal and direction.

We live in an age of certainty – God is like THIS (or there is NO God). Reading the mind of God is commonplace – as is reporting back with total authority. Yet this is also a time of indifference, loneliness and anxiety. Many of the people we work with are sad. Some of us are deeply sad. All those factors and many others come together and affect our common dreams. Religion is clearly implicated in much of the suffering and violence in our contemporary world. Common to our dreams must surely be a longing that spiritual transformation could bring with it a much deeper and more revolutionary sense of the beauty of humanity, the goodness and kindness of humanity, the possibilities of justice for humanity, real hope for humanity, so that we could respond to that and be part of that.

You are here to think about “religion as a progressive agent”. But being “progressive” is not enough. After all, it is perfectly possible to hold progressive views, relatively speaking, and still to resist the inner earthquakes that crack you wide open and force you to think about what life is. What matters, and in fact the only thing that matters, is not the idea of “progressive religion” so much as real live people resolving to *live* in a way that is spirit-focused, that is huge-hearted, inclusive, tolerant, thoughtful, good humoured, questing, forgiving and – above everything - kind.

Such behaviour is fundamental to spiritual practice and transformation. But such behaviour is also not enough.

Quieting our minds so we can leave surface clutter behind, using prayer as a time to listen rather than speak, taking time to discover or rediscover the depth of receptivity that meditation allows, assessing the quality of our reading, reflecting deeply on who we are and what life is for, allowing ourselves to melt into and learn from nature – our “inner tuning” as in the Hazrat Inayat Kahn quote above - all of that also matters, not for ourselves only but also for our world.

Such inner discovery and commitment is not secondary to our outer efforts, *it transforms those efforts*. Perhaps it transforms them from anxious good intentions and need for approval, or from fear that we are not already “good enough” or “worthy”. That is already a radical liberation that makes us far

less judgemental of other people as well as far more compassionate and accepting of ourselves. What's more, those changes link our lives, or illuminate the links our lives already have. We cannot make those efforts for our own sakes only – yet if we leave ourselves out (“saving” the world but not ourselves), we have also failed to understand what spiritual transformation is and what *living* is.

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I would like to share a poem that is less a poem than a common dream.

Imagine if all the tumult of the body were to quiet down, along with all our busy thoughts about earth, sea and air;  
if the very world should stop, and the mind cease thinking about itself, go beyond itself, and be quite still;  
if all the fantasises that appear in dreams and imagination should cease, and there be no speech, no sign:  
Imagine if all things that are perishable grew still –  
For if we listen they are saying, “We did not make ourselves; He made us, who abides forever.”  
Imagine, then, that they should say this and then fall silent, listening to the very voice of Him who made them rather than to the voice of his creation –  
So that we should hear not His word through the tongues of men, nor the voice of angels, nor the clouds’ thunder, nor any symbol, but the very Self which in these things we love, and go beyond ourselves to attain a flash of that eternal wisdom which abides above all things.  
And imagine if that moment were to go on and on, leaving behind all other sights and sounds but this one vision that ravishes and absorbs and fixes the beholder in joy.

This exquisite poem is from Saint Augustine, about whom I have mixed feelings, yet his call here strikes me as nothing less than sublime. It was another poet, Rabindranath Tagore, who said that our true life lies at great depth within us. *Deep needs to speak to deep*. Augustine does that.

When I look around I see with great regret that much of our religious effort is so timid, so apprehensive, so conditional and afraid – bereft of vitality and passion (except passion about what is unacceptable or despised). And yet, I must ask, what are we seeking through our spirituality if it is not a passionate and engaged discovery of who and *what we most truly are*? And if there is a God in our lives, what does that relationship amount to if it is not built on committed and fearless expressions and experiences of love?

What mediocrity do we condemn ourselves to when we do not risk that?

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In many religious traditions the spiritual “heart” is the holiest place on earth: some would say it is where the divine lives and finds expression. Going to that place – the place of your spiritual heart – can seem like a very long journey indeed. Your qualifications may not help you. Your favourite maps may not guide you. It is a journey no one can take it for you. What was Jesus doing on his forty-day and forty-night retreat in the desert? What was he giving up? More crucially, what was he *receiving*?

You don’t need me to point out that the highest priority for many religious bodies and institutions is correctness (and especially relatively *greater* correctness), closely followed by self-preservation. Yet correctness and self-preservation are not invitations to spiritual transformation. They are not sacred! They are not inclusive, dynamic or loving! People are starving for a sacred experience of love, and for a glimpse that there is more to living than a change of car, spouse or mortgage rate. Is it any wonder that they flee churches if it is timidity or staleness that they encounter – or dogma rather than divine relationship?

For many Christians theological discussion is still more comfortable than looking too far inwards. Talking *about* God is evidently still more welcome than surrendering to the mystery (and confusion) of divine presence. “Praying” is still more familiar than simply *being*. In this age of certainty we may despise or despair of noisy fundamentalism – yet continue to be afraid or avoidant of stillness. Psalm 46, Vs 10: “Be still and know that I am God” is the greatest call to an inner-led life that one could imagine. Nonetheless, one of the great markers of our age, and in many churches, is an endemic discomfort with silence and inwardness. We walk into our houses and turn on the television and even here, at this conference together, we talk and talk. We talk when we have something to say and we talk when we haven’t much to say. The highest priority of many immensely well-meaning people is to fill space and not rest in it to see what (and who) emerges.

Ninety per cent of what we hear, even when we think we are really listening, is confused and distorted by our own assumptions. We hear through the veil of our expectations. Silence can undo some of that. Yet when did you last attend a Christian service, other than a Quaker Meeting, that allowed more than a few minutes to listen to the “small quiet voice” within – to listen to the leadings of the heart, or to listen *to* God rather than to lots of words and theories and ideas *about* God? When did you last attend a Christian conference where a higher priority was given – then and there – to spiritual practice than to “urgent” practicalities or talk *about* spiritual practice? We are so much more inclined to be Martha than Mary: busy, busy and again busy. Our Martha-like service is essential. Yet, I would like to ask, what could be more urgent than attending with love to the inner, spiritual starvation that engulfs and threatens our world?

Imagine if all the tumult of the body were to quiet down, along with all our busy thoughts about earth, sea and air; if the very world should stop, and the mind cease thinking about itself, go beyond itself, and be quite still; if all the fantasies that appear in dreams and imagination should cease, and there be no speech, no sign...

I want to emphasise here that I talking about spiritual transformation and not psychological transformation only. This is the challenge! Not that one is achieved without the other, I do understand that, but it is a question of where we put our focus. In my books, and particularly in *Forgiveness and Other Acts of Love*, *The Universal Heart* and *Choosing Happiness*, I very clearly show that we cannot usefully separate the social, psychological and spiritual means of gaining insight and achieving growth. However, here, in the presence of our common dreams, I want us to focus on the unsayable, the unspeakable and unknowable: the easily and constantly overlooked life of spirit and soul.

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Spiritual transformation can be dramatic and immediate. Isaiah's vision of God in the temple, Saul's conversion, Dame Julian of Norwich's dialogues with Our Lord, Ramakrishna's vision of Kali, Mohammed hearing the Angel Gabriel recite the Koran: these are big moments, by any measure. For most of us, however, I suspect that spiritual transformation began and will continue with the small. Or is it so small?

Whatever our spiritual education and training, authentic spiritual transformation arises from a moment of *personal* insight that there is something more to life than the familiar materiality of measurable and finite forms – or the received messages of our spiritual inheritance. It must arise from within; it can be encouraged – but it can't be imposed or given. (It won't happen through fear or threats; oh joy of that!) It will follow a perception that along with this *finite* familiar life we also have an *infinite* life of spirit. It may lead to a sense that "soul" seeks expression through our personality "self". It may also lead to a truly life-changing consciousness that every other human being on our planet earth is and was and will be something more than flesh and blood: that regardless of race, gender, culture, *etcetera ad infinitum*, each being is also a "soul" or spirit or possessed of Buddha-nature – however this transcendent dimension of life is described.

When we let that insight become real, it is deeply and utterly transformative. We become soul conscious; spirituality becomes our primary identification. One great saying that brings it to life comes from the founding Quaker, George Fox, who said, "Walk lightly on this earth, answering that of God in

everyone." He didn't say: "Answering that of God in everyone who looks, prays or thinks as you do." He did say, *everyone*. Like them? Don't like them? *Everyone*. Spiritual transformation takes us from conditionality to unconditionality: from a limited judgemental human view to something nearer to a divine view. Do we need any guidance other than that? Probably not, but I would anyway like to tell a couple more stories about the power of spiritual transformation.

In 2004, the year before I was ordained as an Interfaith Minister, I was in New York after our class retreat. I was then, as I am now, living in Sydney (and studying by distance, mainly), but had stayed on to witness the ordination of the class ahead of mine and was very excited about this event and all that it would signify for me in the year ahead. On the day of the ordination we gathered in St John Divine, a wonderful neo-Gothic cathedral in Upper Manhattan, and one of the very senior people from the seminary got up to speak and, among other things, talked about what a fantastic job "our" US Army was doing in the Middle East – especially Iraq. I was deeply offended by this and genuinely shocked. After the ordination was over and we were socialising, I tried to speak to him about this, only to discover he was deeply offended by my offence – in fact, he was incredulous and angry. I talked to him about my experience of twenty years with the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) and what a Peace Testimony meant to me, but we made no headway. I was also unconvinced by his point of view, and remained upset.

The following year, 2005, I knew that one of the people who would be involved in ordaining me would be this particular man. That was a very interesting experience for me. I have spent years of my life cultivating a facility for forming an opinion! I have spent rather fewer years trying to undo the intensity of that, trying to be a little more compassionate with myself as well as less assertive with other people. So, when I came to be ordained, there were three people standing in front of me and one of them was this particular person. And in that moment I experienced something so unexpected and so extraordinary which was that as he put his hands on my head, I experienced him as a humble instrument of the divine - and that this was all I myself could also hope to be. In that moment I experienced my absolute sisterhood in God with that man. The total *unimportance* of his personality and his unwelcome views was clear to me in that moment amidst the profound awareness that, somehow or other, in that moment grace had flowed to set what was unimportant completely to one side. What's more, because at the level of personality I had felt such irritation with and even contempt for that man I gained something I could never have discovered had I already felt generous towards him. (I do not mean that it does not matter what or how we think. It matters. But in that moment, something else also became and was much more real to me.)

That story also illustrates one of the great differences in thinking about spiritual transformation between the East and the West. In the West spiritual transformation is associated with salvation and atonement, “transformation from sin”, transforming or “saving” others as well as ourselves. In the East, spiritual transformation is about enlightenment – about *seeing* life and our place in life and even what precedes and follows “life” differently and with ever-increasing truth – and then acting accordingly. “Saving” occurs indirectly, through compassion and example. It can’t be achieved for another person and it certainly can’t be imposed.

This makes our own opportunities for insight, and the powerful changes in consciousness that follow genuine insight, more and not less important. That is where I stand: not with transformation as liberation from sin and especially from original sin – in which I do not believe (despite quoting Augustine above, and knowing his part in the tragic original sin story) – but as a liberation from ignorance of what life (and Life) is offering and opening within us.

There are plenty of examples of that in the stories we have of Jesus Christ: profound examples of a pull and a call to nothing but a passionately loving and unconditionally inclusive vision – and to ourselves as part of that, *living* that, not thinking about it only.

This needs to be an individual insight – “Once was blind, but now I see” – but it is never achieved alone. *We learn from one another*. We depend utterly on one another. We depend on the light and the wisdom that has already been given. Spiritual transformation makes us more at home in *this* world, more protective of *this* world and one another. As we change, the way in which we are influenced and *how we ourselves influence* also changes. How could it not? We may be divinely inspired and supported (I believe we are), but when we transform through a change in consciousness and perception it transforms utterly our sense of connection with one another, with nature, with all living creatures, and our own place in the wholeness not just of life but of this life and the Eternal.

“Lead us from the Unreal to the Real; from Ignorance, to Illumination”, the ancient Hindu Upanishads teach us. From where can those “leadings” come other than through our hearts, intuitions, insights and dreams? We are never convinced and moved forward through our minds only; minds and hearts must come into accord to shake us and wake us. A “good idea” is also not enough; it has to be embodied. Idea or inspiration has to be transformed into reality even as it is transforming us. Here is another story – about where we, too, can be heading.

Soon after his own enlightenment the Buddha passed a man on the road. The man was struck by the Buddha’s radiance and peaceful presence. (I am

going to interrupt this story because I have also been in the presence of people who are radiant – perhaps enlightened - and it *is* enormously uplifting to be in their presence. It doesn't depend on their cleverness. It doesn't depend on what they say or don't say. It doesn't depend on anything much at all - except *presence*. When they have spent enough time in the presence of truth, love and compassion, *they are themselves changed*. And being with them causes one also to feel changed, uplifted and exhilarated. *Deep speaks to deep*. So, I like this story very much.)

The man on the road who was struck by the Buddha's radiance stopped and asked him, "My friend, what are you? Are you a celestial being or a god?" "No," said the Buddha. "Are you a magician?" asked the man. "No," said the Buddha. "Are you a man?" he asked again. "No," said the Buddha. In total mystification the man asked, "Then what are you?" And the Buddha replied, "I am awake." (In fact, "Buddha" means "awakened one".)

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Awake to what matters; awake to what causes suffering and relieves it; awake to the continuities of existence as well as to what is transient; awake to the need to make some discoveries independently; awake to the transformative power of grace and illumination and insight: that is what the Buddha meant.

The story of spiritual transformation that I suspect many of you are most familiar with is just as beautiful, just as wondrous: (Galatians 2.) *For through the law, I died to the law. It is no longer I who live. It is Christ who lives in me.*

*Dying* to the limitations in the way you usually see yourself; *living* to the call and the strengths of the soul; *daring* to open to the Christ: that *is* spiritual transformation.

And now a final story that's told by Rev Dr Martin Luther King in his book, *Strength to Love* – which is already such a wonderful title as it does take strength to love and to heal rather than to disparage, criticise, pull apart or walk away, or resort to violence.

In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had almost gone, I determined to take my problem to God. My head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. 'I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid... I am at the end of my powers, I have nothing left...'

At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never before experienced him. It seemed as though I could bear the

quiet assurance of an inner voice saying, 'Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever.'...

Three nights later, our house was bombed. Strangely enough, I accepted the word of the bombing calmly. My experience with God had given me a new strength and trust. I knew now that God is able to give us the interior resources to face the storms and problems of life.

Let this affirmation be our ringing cry. It will give us courage to face the uncertainties of the future...When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds and our night become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a great benign Power in the universe whose name is God, and he is able to make a way out of no way, and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. This is our hope for becoming better people. This is our mandate for seeking to make a better world.

What else could bring you such strength, but opening to spirit? *Taking in* Martin Luther King's words, let his affirmation of love be our own ringing cry. It will give us courage to face the uncertainties of our own future, when our own days become dreary, with low hovering clouds and our own nights become darker than a thousand midnights. Let us remember.

And perhaps that's all spiritual practice is. "Let us remember" may be all we need to remember! "Let us remember" who we are and, above all, *what* we are. We are not just a pair of hands, a bank balance, a degree or two, a label. As Rumi cried out, "Look through the eyes of the Beloved and you will see the Beloved everywhere." That's what spiritual transformation allows.

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I spoke elsewhere in this conference about the importance of "surrendering borders": meeting people as spiritual brothers and sisters regardless of faith or no-faith labels. Doing that takes courage. Surrendering to the Mystery takes courage. But the startling and wonderful truth is that it also brings courage. When we step towards Mystery or the purpose of living, Mystery also steps towards us. "The One that you are seeking... is also seeking you...."

Opening the heart, living from the heart in a heart-fearing world, giving up the short-term comforts of certainty, takes great courage. It is easily trivialised, easily trampled upon. Yet the difference that such living makes is indescribable. What we do and how we see ourselves and other people is literally transformed by our inner perceptions, even and especially when the "outside" never ceases to count.

I would like to speak a hope or a prayer for our common dream: that we would dare, at least sometimes, to open our hearts and minds fully and unreservedly to love. That we would dare, at least sometimes, to open our minds and hearts fully and unreservedly to silence, to inwardness, to surrender, even embracing the darkness and uncertainty that is also part of our spiritual existence with gentleness, interest and compassion. That we trust, as an unconditional commitment, that love "*can be our measure*", that love can guide and sustain our actions, that love *can* transform our world and us, because everything follows that - and nothing matters more.

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