

THE TRANSFORMATIONAL ODYSSEY

FINDING YOUR PATH TO PERSONAL
TRANSFORMATION AND SELF-RENEWAL



Robert Barner

The Transformational Odyssey: Finding Your Path to Personal Transformation and Self-Renewal

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**INFORMATION AGE PUBLISHING, INC.
Charlotte, NC • www.infoagepub.com**

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The CIP data for this book can be found on the Library of Congress website (loc.gov).

Paperback: 978-1-68123-982-8

Hardcover: 978-1-68123-983-5

eBook: 978-1-68123-984-2

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Printed in the United States of America

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ENDORSEMENTS

The road to self-discovery is one that has been traveled before. *The Transformational Odyssey* explores this journey in a unique and different way, by beginning at the intersection of academic exploration and the examination of authentic experiences. Robert Barner finds ways to challenge his readers, while also guiding each person in a way that is most logical and emotionally transcendent to them, and he does so in an insightful, compelling way. I highly recommend this book to anyone who is ready to be vulnerable and wants to grow.

—Kelvin Beachum Jr., *NFL Athlete,
Investor, Speaker, Philanthropist*

This is a dazzlingly ambitious book and it does not disappoint. Thought-provoking, compelling, and an extraordinary source of scientifically-based insight for anyone seeking to improve their lives.

—Jim Loehr, *Best-selling author, and co-founder of
The Human Performance Institute*

*The Transformational Odyssey: Finding Your Path to Personal Transformation
and Self-Renewal*, pages vii–ix.

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The Transformational Odyssey enlists the reader in a powerful journey, grounded in their own creative imagination and wells of inspiration. This road of self-renewal is exciting and dangerous and the work is not for the timid. Robert Barner knows the territory intimately and is a guide you can both trust and enjoy.

—Charles J. Palus Ph.D., Senior Fellow
Center for Creative Leadership

This amazing book, *The Transformational Odyssey*, combines two divergent forms of writing—intelligent, compassionate self-help and serious academic research. The book provides rich context and intelligent wisdom to a timely topic. A first in the genre of self-help and a delight to read!

—Dr. Leni Wildflower, PCC, Founder, Evidence Based Coaching,
Fielding Graduate University
Santa Barbara, California, USA
Director, Knowledge Based Coaching in the Workplace
United Kingdom

The Transformational Odyssey book invites the readers for a deep reflection on their meaningful life events, as well as challenging major life setbacks and losses. It encourages the readers to take a deep dive into their situation and, in return, provides fantastic support on how to cope with these challenging life experiences. The book offers a variety of impactful learning methods for self-empowerment and self-discovery.

—Vered Asif, Founder at Punkt-I, Global Leaders Development &
Associate Faculty with the Center for Creative Leadership, Europe

Give yourself a gift by giving yourself *Transformational Odyssey*. Many of us keep ourselves small. But for anyone ready to grow very tall, this splendid compendium will bring you sparkling insights, stories, step-by-step instructions, and everything you need to know about becoming the best version of yourself. This is the book that I wish I had written. But now I do not need to. Basic and erudite, *Transformational Odyssey* fires your imagination with new ways to love and tend yourself and become the total person that you did not know you could be.

—Meena S. Wilson, Ph.D., Executive Director
Genpact Centre for Women's Leadership
Ashoka University, Sonapat, India

In *The Transformational Odyssey*, Dr. Robert Barner offers what few self-help books do—a research-based journey into self-awareness leading to real and sustained change. In embarking on this journey, readers will become more attuned to their experiences, more open to others, and more effective leaders, partners,

parents, and friends. I highly recommend this book for those courageous enough to encounter transformational learning!

—Jaime Goff, Ph.D., LMFT, LPC
Certified Executive Coach and President, The Empathic Leader, LLC

A saying attributed to Paulo Coelho is, “When you repeat a mistake, it is not a mistake anymore: it’s a decision.” Reading *The Transformational Odyssey* will inspire you to be more question-driven and make the decision to learn from your mistakes. To open yourself up for self-reflection, and by that open up to a transformative learning approach—where you with an open mind allow yourself to experiment with new ideas and behaviors. By being more open to both yourself and to others you will be able to engage in more rich and meaningful relationships

—Jonas Janebrant
Vice President MiL Institute, Sweden

The Transformation Odyssey is an excellent resource for professionals who work with clients/patients grieving the death of a loved one. A healthy grief journey leads to the reconciliations of the loss and the conscious decision to construct a “new normal.” Bob Barner provides a step-by-step guide to help the griever on their journey to fully embrace life again. I highly recommend this book to mental health professionals because of the clear practical steps of treatment that even include a word-by-word guide for the clinician. On a personal level, I especially appreciate the 4C Test (clear, compelling, cohesive, circumbent) because I am quickly approaching my retirement years and need to develop a string new vision for my life. Bob’s work is applicable to all ages and stages of life. I only wish I had had such a priceless resource when I was beginning adulthood. I strongly endorse the *Transformation Odyssey* and look forward to using it with our clients.

—Laurie Taylor, Executive Director
Grief & Loss Center of North Texas, Dallas, Texas, USA

PREFACE

A Little Bit About This Book

Something caused you to pick up this book and skim through it. Perhaps you are at the point in your life where you are stepping back to reflect on how your own personal life journey is playing out. It might be that you have recently encountered a significant life event, such as the loss of someone dear to you or a major career transition, which has forced you to reassess the direction that you are currently taking in your life. Or it may simply be that you are the type of person who refuses to stop growing, and who is deeply invested in your own continued development as a human being. Whatever the reason, if you have a serious interest in engaging in a journey of self-discovery and renewal, then you have picked up the right book.

The idea for *The Transformational Odyssey* came about after I collaborated with Dr. Ken Ideus, a very talented executive coach and consultant, in our recent book, *Working Deeply: Transforming lives through transformational coaching*. Our intent in writing that book was to provide experienced coaches and leadership development professionals with an applied method for helping their coaching clients engage in the “deep work” of transformational learning.

A funny thing happened as we sent out advance copies of our book to our coaching clients, and to selected colleagues and associates. Several readers asked

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us if we had ever considered writing a similar book that could help them take greater control over their own self-development. One of the things that these feedback providers shared with us was that they were particularly interested in understanding how to work through those opportunities for learning that sometimes accompany critical and challenging life experiences.

I had a particular interest in these inquiries since an important part of my academic writing and instruction has involved the topics of mindfulness, life stories (narratives), and transformational learning. These suggestions got me interested in exploring the genre of self-help literature to find out what had already been written on the subject of self-directed approaches to transformational learning. Sad to say, I was very disappointed in what I found. I soon discovered that many of the so-called “self-help” books that have been published (and I read quite a few in preparation for this writing project) merely skim the surface by offering only a simplistic advice-column approach to this topic. Having concluded that there was a need for a book that went deeper than easy platitudes and homespun anecdotes, I launched into this work.

In *The Transformational Odyssey* I strive to take an approach that is far more ambitious, and one that I feel will be much more valuable to my readers. This approach incorporates my forty years of experience as an executive coach, counselor, and talent development expert. It is also based relevant research in the field of human development, including such exciting new fields as narrative analysis, mindfulness, and the exploration of future selves. I have written *The Transformational Odyssey* in a conversational style, just as if I were sitting down next to you to share my advice and counsel in the role of your personal coach and advisor. Whenever possible, I have tried to share with you some of the same personal development methods that I have successfully introduced to my executive coaching and consulting clients.

In the following pages you will not find easy, cookbook solutions to your life problems. Instead, I have attempted to provide something that is far more valuable; namely, a structured and applied approach for identifying the types of *questions* that you need to consider in order to advance in your life journey, along with a proven methodology for *exploring* those questions in a deeper and richer way. These questions and learning methods are designed to help you become more deeply self-reflective on your current life situation, identify your most important resources for supporting your own personal growth, and test the boundaries of what you know about yourself as a person.

I believe that, at its best, learning represents a kind of crazy quilt mosaic; an intertwining of inspiration, imagination, and creative ideas. If you stand too close to a mosaic, at first the colors and components blur together into a confusing blur. Mosaics take on deeper meaning only when you have stepped far enough back to take in the overall pattern. Similarly, in designing this book I have strived to find ways for you to occasionally step back and take perspective. As you read, I encourage you to treat this book as you would a reference guide on nutrition or

fitness. By this I mean that the way to obtain the best benefit from this book is to periodically pause to apply the advice that you will find here. In addition, at times in your reading you may encounter an idea or suggestion that is unfamiliar to you, or with which you strongly disagree. If you do, I encourage you not to take my recommendations at face value. Instead, form your own opinions based on your review of the *Related Research* section that I have provided in every chapter.

Having worked with hundreds of coaching clients and graduate students, I know that people learn in different ways. Some people grasp an idea more readily when it is converted to an analogy or metaphor, while others prefer that learning proceed in a straight-forward fashion. As a result, in creating *The Transformational Odyssey* I have made use of a variety of learning methods, including cases, exercises, suggested actions, famous quotes, metaphors, and relevant research in the field of human psychology.

I designed *The Transformational Odyssey* to serve the needs of those individuals who are attempting to engage in self-discovery, or work through difficult life changes. Having said that, many others should also find this book to be a valuable resource. If you are a professional coach, counselor, or talent development professional, in the following chapters you will discover a variety of self-help tools that you can use to support the personal and professional development of your clients. It is my hope that *The Transformational Odyssey* will also prove valuable to those instructors of college courses in the areas of transformational learning and personal development.

If you are ready to make a significant change in your life *The Transformational Odyssey* can serve as a starting point in your journey. In reading and working through it, try to keep an open mind and take some small risks by experimenting with some of the suggested techniques and methods. Finally, although this book has been written as a self-directed guide, I know that quite often the process of transformational learning requires the support and assistance of a skilled helper. Depending upon your needs, that helper can take the form a coach, counselor, or trusted confidant. Having worked as a counselor, consultant, and coach, and having benefited at different points in my life from the guidance and help of such professionals, I appreciate the many ways in which helpers can encourage individuals to grow and develop. For these reasons, throughout this book I discuss the role that a helper can play at each stage of your transformational odyssey. These roles include serving as a listening post and sounding board, listening to your story without imposing judgment, and challenging you to construct a more vivid and viable picture of your desired future.

INTRODUCTION

Beginning Your Journey

WHEN IS LEARNING TRULY TRANSFORMATIONAL?

Every day we are confronted with a vast amount of new, and often conflicting, information. We read an article about the questionable benefits of a new vitamin supplement that we have been using and wonder whether we should stop taking it. We listen to a podcast from an advice columnist offering five simple steps for creating new loving relationships and consider whether we should implement them. We hear from different co-workers conflicting comments about how well we appear to be settling into a new job, and attempt to step back take an objective look at ourselves. Each day we don the roles of concerned parent, innovative entrepreneur, caring friend, partner, or spouse, and occasionally we pause to ask ourselves how well we are succeeding within each of these roles.

In all of these experiences, we strive to engage in learning that can help us make sense of our lives, achieve a feeling of personal fulfillment, and derive meaning from the world around us. Not all learning is the same, however. It is helpful to think of personal learning as taking place within three consecutive and interacting layers, each of which yields something of very different value. Understanding the

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difference between these three levels is the first step to knowing whether you are involved in a learning process that merely adds a few facts to your memory banks, or one that fully engages you in a way that is truly life changing and personally transformative.

Level 1: Instrumental Learning

The most common kind of learning, called *behavioral* or *instrumental learning*, involves gathering facts and information, mastering new skills, or changing problematic behaviors. You engage in instrumental learning whenever you attempt to improve your communication skills, learn to play a musical instrument, strengthen a leadership competency, or attempt to undo a bad habit.

Level 2: Personal Self-Reflection

While instrumental learning is certainly useful and may even prove personally fulfilling, it can only take you so far on the path to self-discovery. Inevitably, at some point in your life journey you will find yourself dealing with life questions and personal issues that require you to “go beyond the facts.” You may be trying to understand why someone who was close to you has decided to distance herself from you, why your future suddenly seems so confusing or why, after having achieved a long-sought personal goal, you feel disappointed with the outcome.

In any of these situations you need to engage in a different type of learning; one that requires you to shift your attention from facts to feelings; from learning about the world at large, to discovering how you make sense of, and interpret, that world. In other words, you need to dive a little deeper to engage in *personal self-reflection*. This second level of learning is derived from the kind of insight you gain when you hold a mirror up to yourself for self-review. The starting point for operating at this second level of learning is to ask yourself the right questions (I will share some examples for you later on in this book), and to perform a closer examination of the decisions you make and the actions you choose to take. As you do, you begin to uncover how your life experiences reveal meaningful underlying patterns regarding your core values, personal needs, and life goals. In my coaching practice I have found that one way in which individuals demonstrate that they are beginning to work at this level of self-reflective insight is when they begin to explore how they might be working for, or against, their own personal and professional goals.

Level 3: Transformational Learning

Personal self-reflection can take you far in your life journey. At the same time, we all encounter moments where we sense that we are standing at some critical crossroad in our lives, where self-reflection is not enough to help us find our way forward. In these moments, the choices that lie in front of us may appear very limited or be completely unknown. At the same time, we know that the next few

steps we take in our life journey may forever change our fate. Sometimes, these existential crossroads arrive in the form of life events that are so emotionally powerful that they force us to reexamine our long-held assumptions about who we are, our life priorities, and even our sense of personal identity. An unexpected job loss, the death of a loved one, or the stress of adjusting to a new country and culture are all situations that can force us to look more closely at our lives, and the paths we have chosen for ourselves.

For some of us, these moments of life change don't arise as a by-product of some singular catalytic life event. Rather, we experience them as the build up of a whole series of changes that have gradually begun to surface from somewhere deep inside of us. It may be that we are quite confused regarding why the path that we have chosen in life has brought us neither happiness nor fulfillment. On the other hand, we begin our journey with a sense of excitement and anticipation, as we sense that there is so much more within us that has yet to be unleashed.

Regardless of the form it takes, if we are open to these moments of learning and are willing to take some emotional risks we may experience what Dr. Jack Mezirow, a seminal researcher in the field of adult development, has termed *transformational learning*. Dr. Mezirow (2000) has described transformational learning as the process through which we gain new and useful perspectives on our world, and ourselves, by becoming more aware of those beliefs, biases, and assumptions that inform our views.

In other words, transformational learning requires you to take your life off autopilot. It means making explicit and being willing to reexamine many of the beliefs and assumptions that you hold about what it means to be a great leader, a good parent, a loving partner, or a “success story.” It also means being willing to test those cherished beliefs and assumptions against the reality of what you are actually experiencing now in your life. Another way of saying this is that *in transformational learning you compare the story that you have been telling yourself about who you are and where you are headed, with the story that you are actually living.*

WHY TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING IS SO IMPORTANT

When we immerse ourselves in transformational learning we gain something of incredible value, not merely because of *what* we learn about ourselves, but also because we initiate a powerful, positive change in *how* we come to learn about ourselves as human beings. The result is a self-awakening that is at once both empowering and liberating. In doing so we become more open to alternative perspectives, and more resilient and adaptable in the face of stressful change. At the same time, we come to adopt a worldview that is far more expansive and fluid, and we learn to free ourselves from self-imposed limitations.

Over the years, I have noticed several ways in which the experience of transformational learning reveals itself in my counseling and coaching clients. As individuals engage in deep learning they discover how to give voice to the types of

people they want to become. One outcome of coaching is that leaders become increasingly aware of the impact that their decisions and behaviors are having both on their own lives, and on the lives of those around them. Through this process of self-discovery people sometimes realize that they have been acting in ways that actually work directly against their stated personal, and professional, goals and values. I have also witnessed situations in which a client's learning experience has been so profound that the insights gained in coaching extend beyond the workplace into other areas of that person's lifescape, including family relationships and personal health. At the same time, these changes are noted and commented on by the client's partner or spouse, family members, and friends—the people in the client's life who are most important to that individual.

One of the reasons for this is that the transformational learning process translates into a willingness to become more open to others' views, and to remain non-defensive in the face of critical feedback. Such learners also come to recognize those situations that can trigger destructive thoughts and emotions. As they do, they become less reactive to challenging interpersonal situations. Another way to say this is that *through transformational learning individuals learn to become more intentional or purposeful in their behavior*. In the end, the experience of transformational learning can challenge our views regarding our own potential as human beings.

WHY TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING CAN BE CHALLENGING

From the moment we are born we learn how to protect ourselves. One of our innate mechanisms for self-survival is the fight-or-flight response, the automatic response of our nervous system that provides us with an extra boost of energy (with associated stress) whenever we encounter a potential threat. This response has been with humanity throughout our evolution, as an innate survival mechanism for coping with the dangers of our world, be they predators or hostile tribes.

At the same time we have also evolved the ability to think abstractly, with the result that we can envision potential future scenarios, ruminate about the past, fantasize about the highly improbable, and work with abstract concepts and symbols. This capacity for abstract thinking enables us to construct a very vivid and detailed mental map of everything we know. The central feature of this map, our self-concept, serves as the lighthouse beacon we use to navigate through life. Incorporated into our self-concept are several components:

- All of the beliefs we hold to be true about ourselves,
- Those positive and negative qualities that we view as being an integral part of who we are,
- Those parts of ourselves that we regard as being relatively fixed and unchangeable, and
- The “self” that we see reflected in the eyes of others.

Our hard-wired fight-or-flight response and our capacity for abstract thinking interact from the moment we are born. The byproduct of this interaction is that by the time we become adults the “self” that we try to protect from danger extends well beyond our physical bodies to include all of those beliefs and assumptions that form our sense of personal identity.

We all like to believe that our mental maps are carved in stone, and can be relied upon to serve as a predictable guide to life. The problem, of course, is that our mental maps never provide a completely accurate representation of our world. At the same time, whenever we encounter a situation in which our mental maps do not accurately reflect the underlying terrain, our self-protective “immune systems” are triggered, with the result that we are likely to regard any new information that challenges this stable conception of self as a threat to our survival. Just as our immune system automatically mobilizes killer cells to confront foreign invaders, we respond to such perceived threats by immediately mobilizing all of our resources to our defense. The more that we feel that a life event challenges our self-concept, the more that our inner immune system is, likely to be triggered, causing us to deny, distort, or destroy that which we view as personally threatening.

This natural self-protective mechanism can be triggered by even relatively minor life events. Suppose that someone whom you respect tells you that she doesn’t agree with a decision that you made. In this situation, it is easy to quickly jump from the thought, “she is telling me that she doesn’t agree with my decision,” to “she is telling me that I made a stupid decision,” to “she is telling me that I am stupid.” This ability to convert even the smallest life experience into something that we view as a personal threat is one of our biggest barriers to personal growth. It is one of the reasons that deep transformational learning is, at once, both the most liberating and the most challenging aspect of self-learning. On the plus side, such learning provides us with rich opportunities for meaningful self-discovery. At the same time, the only way that we can take part in this process of self-discovery is by learning how to overcome our natural hard-wired threat-response. This means remaining open to what we can learn from all of our life experiences, including those that may be personally painful or that challenge some of our pet ideas about who we are, what we value, and the direction that we have set for ourselves.

A mind that is stretched by new experiences can never go back to its old dimensions.

—*Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.*

This learning process is difficult, but is well worth the effort. I think that Justice Holmes’ comment embodies much that is so important about transformational learning. It is a fundamental process of deep personal discovery that, once initiated, helps an individual forever stretch beyond any self-imposed limits or boundaries.

IDENTIFYING THE STARTING POINT FOR YOUR JOURNEY

I chose *The Transformational Odyssey* as the title for this book because it is helpful to explore the subject of deep personal learning through the metaphor of a personal odyssey of self-discovery. Before you set out on a journey, you first need to know your starting point. As you begin your transformational odyssey, it is helpful to visualize this journey as originating from one of four different starting points. As you read through the following descriptions take a minute to identify the starting point that best describes your own life situation:

At the Bottom of the Well

Being at the ‘bottom of the well’ means feeling that you have somehow reached a place in your life in which certain aspects of your “life as planned”—your career, a loving relationship, the balance you had hoped to achieve between your work and personal life—have not turned out the way that you had originally planned, or have not yielded the type of satisfaction that you had once hoped for. This situation constitutes a type of “existential buyer’s remorse.” You pause one day to look up from the bottom of the well, asking yourself “how did I ever end up here?” If you are starting out your journey feeling very confused, try to remember that sometimes confusion comes to us as a gift; *it may be your inner voice’s way of asking you to slow down and pay closer attention to those important information signs that you are encountering along life’s highway.*

As I write these words a good friend of mine, Wendy, is mustering up the courage to pull herself out of a long-term, toxic marriage. The process isn’t easy, since this brave woman has two small children, few job skills, and no education beyond a high-school diploma. In addition, up to this point in her adult life Wendy has been totally dependent upon her husband to act as the breadwinner for her family. Over the past few months, as Wendy and I have discussed her situation, she has vacillated between two scenarios. On the one hand, there is the sadness of leaving her husband, and the associated fear of embroiling herself in a hostile child custody battle. On the other hand, there is the inner knowledge that the life that she has known no longer works for her or her children. I am not trained as a family mediator or therapist, and in any case my primary role as close friend precludes me from adopting these roles. Because of these constraints I have encouraged Wendy to seek out these types of helpers, with my own helping roles taking on the form of trusted confidant, listening board, and devil’s advocate.

Ten years ago Wendy had a mental clear picture of how her life would turn out. For this brave woman, the toughest part of her struggle is that the harsh reality that fate has taken her on a very different path. Much of Wendy’s healing has involved allowing herself to obtain closure over this particular chapter in her life story, so that she can give herself permission to finally move on. As Wendy continues to share her story aloud she is learning how to hear, within the structure of her storyline, what she wants in the way of a resolution to her marital relationship. At

the same time, she is gaining a sense of her own power to craft future chapters in her personal narrative. With each of our conversations I see her continue to find her way out of that well of despair. She is learning how to grab a foothold on her future as she finds her voice and recognize the true scope of her human potential.

Lost in the Fog

Perhaps, up to this point in your life, you have felt confident in the direction that you have taken in your life. Recently, however, you have realized that you have reached a point in your journey where you are uncertain as to how to proceed. If you are at a point in your life where; the way ahead seems hidden and obscured, then you are “lost in the fog.” Quite often I have seen this issue arise with experienced professionals who, after having successfully performed for many years in their fields, struggle to determine where to proceed next in their lives and careers.

Ten years ago I was working as a successful corporate executive in the field of talent management and organization development. I had spent close to thirty years in similar internal corporate roles. These positions paid very well, were very prestigious, and offered a great deal in the way of stock options and other perks. Still, I knew that where I had been was not where I wanted to be as I entered the next stage of my life. At the age of fifty-five I felt that I still had a lot of “tread left on the tires”; that is, I knew that I wanted to pursue a life path that allowed me to remain intellectually engaged while continuing to apply my diverse experience. At the same time I was also coming to feel burned out by the corporate grind. After a lot of soul-searching and many discussions with my wife, Charlotte, I decided to take the plunge and move out of the corporate scene to accept a full-time faculty position with my university. Although my current teaching position pays only a fraction of what I had previously been making, at the same time it offers far more work autonomy and provides me with more freedom to write and consult. I share this story because for me being “lost in the fog” meant identifying, from all of the many things that I wanted in my life, those that were most important. It also meant giving myself permission to follow a completely different life path.

On the Edge of the Cliff

Walking “on the edge of the cliff” may take the form of a personal setback, such as losing your job, or dealing with the dissolution of a long-term relationship. It can also take the form of a challenging opportunity that can still test your adaptive capability, such as moving to a different country or starting a new business. In this scenario you are likely to feel highly stressed and pushed to the edge of your limits, as you try to figure how to adapt to, and make sense of, these new life experiences.

A few years ago I spent some time helping one of my graduate students, Linda, explore her career options. Linda was a highly trained IT leader and project man-

ager who had spent several years progressing within a safe and comfortable career path. Her life suddenly changed when she was given the opportunity to take over her company's global training operations at their Paris headquarters. As Linda shared this information with me she admitted that she was experiencing a lot of mixed feelings. On one hand, she knew that this was an incredible opportunity that would enable her to move into to an exciting job role, within one of the culture capitals of the world. On the other hand, up to this point Linda had lived only in the US and had only limited cross-cultural experience. She made previously made only two brief trips to France, and she didn't speak French. On top of this, the training role that she would be assuming extended well beyond technical training to include all leadership and employee training within her company. Finally, the move would require a huge lifestyle adaptation on the part of her family. Should she stay or should she go? The company had given her a week to decide.

It was during this time, as Linda felt herself dangling on the edge of a cliff, that we engaged in a few serious discussions about her options. In the end, Linda decided to jump into the opportunity. Since that time, although she has occasionally admitted to worrying about mastering her new challenges she has never regretted her decision. Linda's decision to move was, of course, only the first part of her transformational journey. Moving into her new role and living within a completely new culture has forced her to look at herself in a totally new way. In the process, she has gained a newfound confidence in her ability to grow and thrive in new and demanding situations.

Stuck on a Plateau

It is possible that none of the three preceding scenarios apply to you. Instead, you may have picked up this book because you view your life as a never-ending process of self-exploration and discovery. At the same time, you may also feel that you are looking for a learning approach that can help you to continue to progress along that inner journey. If you feel that you have been treading on the same spiritual path of self-discovery without making progress, I hope that this book will provide you with the catalyst you need for taking the next step forward.

WHEN YOU ARE STUCK IN THE STABLE STATE

Quite often I find that my clients enter into coaching with a sense of confusion. An important part of that confusion occurs when these professionals have difficulty understanding why their "life as planned" isn't working out so well. Sometimes it is not a matter of poor execution or faulty goals. Instead, the problem is that they have fallen victim to what I have termed the *stable state fallacy*. This is the mistaken belief that your self-concept is set in stone and doesn't change much over time. The reality is that you are continually changing, even at the cellular level. Think about this: the "you" that is sitting there now is at least somewhat different

from the “you” that was here a few months ago, since the cells of your body are continually dying out and being replaced by new cells.

If you want a very powerful testimony to the concept of continual change consider your brain. It was only a few years ago that most people within the scientific community believed that we were born with a certain amount of brain cells that peaked in early adulthood, then gradually died out as we age. Today, through advances in the science of neurogenesis (the generation of new neural cells), we now know that with the combination of a good diet, intense aerobic exercise, and exposing ourselves to continued mental challenges (more on all of this later in this book) we can continue to add new brain cells, well into our senior years.

In short, the physical “you” that is sitting there reading this book is different from the person you were several years ago. On top of that, each event that you experience carries with it some new bit of learning that can leave you altered and changed. In addition, your life circumstances are continually shifting in unexpected ways, meaning that at any given moment the options that are available to you are changing. Finally, your inner landscape—the sum of your emotions, fears, hopes, and desires—is continually changing in response to each significant life event that you interact with, reflect on, and fold into your learning.

Sometimes we try to ignore the sum of these changes until they make themselves known through a confusing array of feelings, yearnings, and concerns that bubble up from somewhere deep inside of us. We ask ourselves, “What’s wrong with me?” when the real question should be, “*What is my confusion and self-bewilderment trying to tell me right now?*” If you have ever felt like this, always keep the following mantra in mind. Feeling “stuck” doesn’t necessarily mean that you have come to the end of your road. Instead, it may very well mean that at a deep, intuitive level you recognize that you need to take stock of your life, recalibrate your goals and priorities, and remain open to new opportunities that may be opening up before you.

One of my previous coaching clients, Daniel, is a highly successful business executive. At the point that we began working together Daniel had already made a lot of money, had the respect of those who worked with him, and was viewed by his CEO as being someone who had the potential to advance further on the executive ladder. At the same time, over the course of our coaching sessions it became evident that Daniel was beginning to question where his life journey had brought him. While he had achieved a high level of business success, he also felt that he was increasingly losing touch with his wife and family, and his long work hours were also beginning to take a toll on his health. As our conversations progressed Daniel began to share with me his concern that somewhere along his life journey something important had become missing or lost. An inquisitive and intellectually curious person, Daniel had read not only a broad array of books on his business and industry but also books on personal development and philosophy. Both his readings and his reflections on his life journey caused him to think more deeply about the part of himself with which he wanted to reconnect.

At Daniel's request I told him that we could invest some of our time together exploring these issues. As a starting point for discussion, I asked him to write down his thoughts about the kind of life that he wanted to experience and the person he wanted to become, ten years in the future. His only instructions for completing the exercise were to be detailed and bold in his writing. Instead of saying things such as, "I want to be able to spend more time with my family," I asked him to write statements such as "It is now ten years in the future. I see myself traveling around the world with my wife, visiting all of the places that I had promised to take her but have never gotten around to." With respect to being bold, I wanted Daniel to take out of his mental closet all of those wild and crazy dreams that he had when he was younger and fold them into his future narrative.

During our next few sessions, as Daniel worked through this exercises he began to experience a significant change in his attitude. He developed a series of targeted actions to help him regain a sense of work/life balance, while improving his health through a program of diet and exercise. He also began to take weekly lessons with a local meditation group—an action that he later told me not only helped him to reduce his stress, but also enabled him to achieve a more peaceful and serene perspective on his life. Finally, he and his wife created a 10-year bucket list that identified all of the places that they intended to travel. Furthermore, he took a strong first-step action in securing this dream by scheduling the first of these trips months ahead on his travel calendar. In all of this, however, perhaps the most important change that occurred inside of Daniel was that he began to nurture a spiritual and compassionate part of himself that he had long since neglected.

While each of these four starting points is very different, a common theme that runs through all of them is that transformational learning involves significant personal change. As I have previously explained, the catalyst for your transformational learning could be the onset of a traumatic or disruptive *external change*, or the gradual realization that a great deal of *internal change* has been taking place inside you for some time. In either case, deep learning always contains the strong interplay between our inner and outer worlds.

THE EIGHT PASSAGES

The word "odyssey" refers to a long, sometimes arduous and meandering journey. It is often a journey that includes a number of unexpected trials and challenges, but one that can result in the traveler obtaining increased wisdom and knowledge. Undertaking a transformational odyssey is seldom easy, but in the end it can be quite fulfilling. The Greek hero, Ulysses (his Latin name was Odysseus), had to overcome a number of challenges to find his way back his home in Ithaca. In much the same way, each of us must overcome certain internal, self-imposed challenges as we strive to "make our way home." This means coming back to that part of us that is most creative, caring, and alive.

In the following chapters I will introduce you to eight passages that you will inevitably encounter during your transformational odyssey. Each of these passages

invites you to engage in a very different type of learning. At the same time, each passage that you successfully traverse increases your capacity for self-growth. As you work through the following chapters please keep in mind that these passages do not follow a predictable order or timeline. For this reason, it is important to be attentive to when a particular chapter resonates with you. When that happens, chances are that you have stumbled upon a personal learning challenge that you need to confront at this particular moment in your life. With each passage that you successfully cross you will find yourself progressing a little further towards finding your way home, on your destination to personal growth and renewal.

The First Passage—Finding the Clearing

At one point in Ulysses' journey his ship ended up on a distant isle where his men encountered the people known as the lotus-eaters. These local inhabitants spent all of their time in a euphoric mental haze caused by eating the lotus flowers that grew on the island. When the crew sampled the lotus flowers they lapsed into such a state of forgetfulness and apathy that they soon forgot about their journey, and gave up all interest in returning home. It was only after Ulysses had forced his crew back on their ship that they regained their senses. Given the hectic pace at which most of us live, it is easy for multi-tasking, stress overload, and complexity to eat away at our ability to focus, and to challenge our ability to remain fully engaged in what is happening NOW in our lives. If you are struggling with this issue in your own life journey, you may sometimes feel that you have wandered into the land of the lotus-eaters. In times like these, it is easy to feel that that you have lost your perspective, and that it is difficult to discern what is truly essential to you in your life. The remedy for this problem is to 'find the clearing,' which means discovering how to periodically pause, step back, and gain perspective on your life situation, and the key to doing that is to learn how to be mindfully present in the moment. The more you are able to fully alive and focused in what you are doing, the more you will feel fully engaged and happy in your life.

The Second Passage—Stepping Into the Unknown

The journey to transformational learning also requires being willing to maintain an open, receptive attitude in the face of new learning experiences. This process becomes more difficult whenever those learning experiences cause us to reflect on, and question, certain long-held beliefs and assumptions we may hold about ourselves. In this chapter you will learn why it can be difficult to remain open to learning when you encounter difficult life experiences. Each time you learn how to overcome these hurdles and remain open to the lessons that life has to offer, you strengthen your potential to grow and develop as a human being.

The Third Passage—Crossing the River

When I think about the fluid and wide range of human potential that each of us encompasses, the image that comes to mind is a river flowing with life and energy; one that holds the promise of endless growth and renewal. Unfortunately, quite often in life we try to construct a protective dam around this river of personal energy. We do this whenever we fall into the trap of defining ourselves, or allowing others to define and constrain us, in terms of a few negative, self-imposed labels. If you succumb to the trap of self-labeling you can eventually block the flow of your life-force, turning your river into a stagnant pond. To continue your journey you must be able to “cross the river,” which means finding ways to embrace your ability to grow and change as a human being.

The Fourth Passage—Facing the Reflecting Pool

The metaphor of ‘facing the reflective pool’ means looking closely at what you are reflecting back to yourself and to others through your personal narratives or life stories. Our life stories are the meaning-making vehicles we use to organize our life experiences into a coherent and meaningful form. One of the most important steps that you can take to support your personal growth is to discover the transformative power of your own personally constructed narratives. This means identifying the life stories that that you have written for yourself, deciding whether these stories are working for you and, if needed, crafting new alternative storylines that are more viable and satisfying. You face the reflective pool whenever you learn how to deconstruct and reinterpret your dominant life stories in ways that support your continued growth.

The Fifth Passage—Ascending the Mountain

At some point in your transformational journey you will encounter the mountain. The mountain is a metaphor for those self-imposed personal constraints and roadblocks that can appear to be almost insurmountable, as you make your way up your transformational path. When climbing, mountaineers protect themselves from falling by driving pitons, or metal spikes, into cracks or seams that they find in the rock. In the same way, the vision that you construct of your future can serve as a means of anchoring yourself to your desired future. If compelling enough, this future narrative can help you pull yourself past any constraints or roadblocks that may be preventing you from moving forward. In this chapter you will learn how to assess the viability of your future narrative through the use of *the 4C Test*; i.e., crafting future stories that are *clear*, *compelling*, *cohesive*, and finally that extend far enough into the future to enable you to *circumvent* the limitations of your current circumstances.

The Sixth Passage—Navigating the Strait

At one point in his travels Ulysses' ship passed through a narrow strait that was bordered by two monsters, the Scylla and the Charybdis. The Scylla was a six-headed monster that would kill sailors if ships passed too close to it, while the Charybdis was a whirlpool that could swallow entire ships. In order to survive and make his way home Ulysses had to navigate his way through these opposing dangers. In the same way, at some point in your transformational journey you may find yourself trapped between the Scylla of stressful change and the Charybdis of personal stagnation. The secret to moving past this gridlock lies in securing a strong ally—that part of you that is strongly invested in personal growth, and willing take a leap of faith to venture into the unknown. As you learn to master this stage of your transformational journey you will find yourself becoming more aware of, and willing to explore, the full range of options and possibilities that lie ahead of you.

The Seventh Passage—Staying on the Path

Each time you engage in serious self-reflection and gain deep personal insights into your inner world, you take important prerequisite steps to your personal growth. At the same time, it is important to understand that these actions are not, by themselves, sufficient to support sustained changes in your life. In this chapter you will learn why it is often very difficult to make the transition from insight to actions. You will then be introduced to six steps you can take to 'stay on the path' to sustained personal change, and to translate your future vision into a concrete plan of action.

The Eighth Passage: Discovering the Oasis

Deep learning can be a transformational, life-changing experience. At the same time, weathering the storm can take its toll on us, since deep personal learning is often precipitated by the catalysts of disruptive and stressful life events. To combat this stress and regain your stamina you need to find that inner oasis where you can strengthen and fortify, your heart and mind. This oasis consists of two parts: the first part involves learning how to strengthen your mind by protecting and enhancing the health of your *brain*, while the second part involves learning how to use meditation to strengthen your *heart*, by supporting your spiritual health and personal growth.

HOW TO MAKE THE BEST USE OF THIS BOOK

The Transformational Odyssey is intended to help you step back and look more deeply at some of the critical life questions that you may be facing. In doing so, I have tried to provide you with techniques and methods that can help you explore those questions in a deeper way, while stopping short of attempting to offer easy,

pat answers to those questions. Although the eight passages are presented through the metaphor of a sequential journey, it is important to note that there is no one-size-fits-all, lockstep, formulaic process for engaging in transformational learning. As you read the following chapters and begin to experiment with the helping actions and tools that you will find here, feel comfortable to work through this book in whatever sequence and time-frame best suits your personal needs. After all, transformational learning does not follow a fixed path or a pre-determined destination; rather, it is a continual life-long journey. Now on to the first passage!

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