

“Extreme Home Makeover”

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On May 24th of this year, which now seems like a lifetime ago, a writer named Sam Anderson wrote a piece for the New York Times magazine.

It was called “The Truth About Cocoons.” Here are a few excerpts.

“Every child knows about cocoons. They’re one of the first things we learn about the natural world. [...]

They introduce us to the wonder of metamorphosis:

A little blobby squirmy thing disappears into a sac and emerges as a flamboyant colourful flappy thing. Magic!”

“In fact,” he says, “That is exactly how we tend to learn about it—as one of nature’s great magic tricks, if not inexplicable then largely unexplained.

The emphasis always seems to be on the ‘before’ and the ‘after,’ never the ‘during.’

The author goes on to say, “Lately, I have found myself wondering, as I sit here hunched inside my dark house...about the part that tends to be skipped:

The confinement, the waiting, the darkness, the change.”

He then describes exactly what does happen to the caterpillar—and it is not pretty.

I'll spare you many of the details, except to say, “What a caterpillar is doing, in its self-imposed quarantine, is “using its enzymes to reduce [itself] into “a nearly formless sludge.”

But then, something called “imaginal discs” emerge, “growing exponentially, taking form” into eyes, wings and so on.

“That’s how you get a butterfly,” Sam Anderson writes. “Out of the horrid meltdown of a modest caterpillar.”¹

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We humans may not go through anything quite so dramatic.

But take a look at a picture of yourself as a child,
and then look in the mirror,
and you can begin to behold that we, too,
undergo profound transformation throughout our lives.

Much like the caterpillar,
though perhaps more gradually,
our bodies go through a complete renovation...

¹ Sam Anderson, *The Truth About Cocoons*, in *The New York Times Magazine*, May 24th, 2020.

And if we're lucky, it seems to me,
our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world
may go through something of a transformation, too.

Just as the caterpillar went through what could be called an
“extreme home makeover” in its cocoon...

We, too, may be undergoing a renovation at this time.

A time of transformation...
spurred along, perhaps, by the Covid-19 pandemic...
but encouraged, too,
by our own willingness to grow.

In our ongoing quest for spiritual and personal growth,
we can trust that this strange time,
as disorienting and challenging as it may be,
can contribute to our unfolding...

To our becoming.

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This month in Journey Groups, we've been thinking about
the theme of “home.”

As we know, “home” can refer not only to a physical place,
but also a state of mind, or a sense of oneself.

All of these things have been undergoing dramatic change
in the past seven months.

And as anyone who's been through one can tell you, no renovation is easy.

So...what's being changed in and around you right now?

Well, to start with, how about this congregation!

We're continuing to adjust to a new and indefinite form of home...not only as we worship online (which still seems completely foreign, let's be honest)...

But as we wonder where we might land in physical space in the years ahead.

This situation, all by itself, can bring up feelings of grief, disorientation, sadness, anxiety, and irritation.

It can lead sometimes to an urge to criticize, fix or change things...perhaps to exert some measure of control over so much that is beyond our control.

And what else has been revamped?

Perhaps your way of working, your pattern of life, your sense of security or your expectations for the future.

Just a few small alterations there.

As well, your social circles have likely changed; your amount of contact with friends and family.

Even your relationship with yourself may be undergoing significant change as you spend more time at home.

As well, some people may be going through the pain of separation or divorce at this time.

Some may be going through a physical move to a new house or apartment...

Some may be challenged by the loss of a job.

And of course there are the very difficult transitions brought about by serious illness or the loss of a loved one during this time, as at any time.

These are all “extreme makeovers” of the “homes” we thought we knew.

Homes we thought, or perhaps hoped, we might stay in for a very long time.

Of course, major renovations like these happen at every stage of life, sometimes on purpose but other times completely without warning.

While some of them may also carry feelings of excitement or anticipation...they may also bring experiences of sadness, anxiety or deep fatigue.

As difficult as these experiences can be, they often lead to a new stage of life or growth that is ultimately for the good.

Elizabeth Lesser is a spiritual writer who wrote an excellent book called “Broken Open: How Difficult Times Can Help Us Grow.”

In the very first paragraph of that book, she writes:

“How strange that the nature of life is change, yet the nature of human beings is to resist change.

And how ironic that the difficult times we fear might ruin us are the very ones that can break us open and help us blossom into who we were meant to be.”

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This is an idea that’s returned to again and again in religious thought:

Breaking down is necessary for growth and transformation.

Of course, it’s echoed all around us in nature, especially in this fall of the year when we revel in the poignant glory of the leaves falling from the trees.

Death must happen before rebirth.

Emptying must take place before refilling.

The “small self” must fall away in order for the True Self to emerge—that which is connected to the essential inner goodness that some call God.

The progressive Christian writer Richard Rohr refers to this as “falling upward”—and he acknowledges that it’s generally an unpopular idea.

Speaking for myself, I don’t like letting go of the familiar, the comfortable, or the easy.

If I were a caterpillar, I probably wouldn’t choose to go through a dark, oozy, sludgy experience for any reason—even if it meant I’d be able to fly!

Yet that’s exactly what Nature—what Life—calls us to do.

Life will have its way with us whether we approve the renovation plans or not.

But wisdom teachers do show us how to practice, so we can get through it a little easier.

In meditation practice, for example, we learn to sit in the formless ooze of doing nothing...often with a fair bit of discomfort.

It’s a short experience of “dying to self,” which can make space for new life.

Cynthia Bourgeault writes, “We all have our wants, needs, preferences, opinions and agendas, some of which are motivated (or at least aggravated) by fear and self-importance.

Dying to self means being willing to let go of what I want (or think I want) in order to create space for God [or Life] to direct, lead and guide me to a truer way of being.”²

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This is core concept of so many wisdom teachings:

The idea that spiritual growth
is a process of subtraction, not addition...

And that there is an inherent Enoughness,
an inherent worth in life itself—
that is much like the “good bones” of a house:

A solid foundation that can support us
through radical change.

This is what the poet Carolyn Locke calls “impossible
light...improbable hope.”

Hope that springs out of absence, not presence...
and out of less, not more.

² Cynthia Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (Cowley, Plymouth UK: 2004), 80-83.

In those rare times when we glimpse what is possible amidst extreme change, “what else can you do,” she says, but let yourself be broken and emptied?”

What else is there but waiting in the autumn sun?”

Carolyn Locke is but one of many, many poets who point to that “essence” of life that is pointed to by language but that also transcends it...allowing us to enter life’s intuitive dimension of wisdom.

Here’s another poem that does the same thing: “The Unbroken” by Rashani Rea.

There is a brokenness
out of which comes the unbroken,
a shatteredness
out of which blooms the unshatterable.

There is a sorrow
beyond all grief which leads to joy
and a fragility
out of whose depths emerges strength.

There is a hollow space too vast for words
through which we pass with each loss,
out of whose darkness we are sanctioned into being.

There is a cry deeper than all sound
whose serrated edges cut the heart
as we break open

to the place inside which is unbreakable
and whole

while learning to sing.

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It makes perfect sense to me that someone would see the caterpillar's journey as a metaphor for what we're going through right now.

As we enter into a renewed time of distancing and isolation, knowing that the dark months of winter are soon to come, many of us are feeling some trepidation, to put it mildly.

Even if we know that change is simply part of life...
and that growth requires discomfort and loss...
we may find ourselves weary, resistant and more than a bit bewildered by it all.

Sam Anderson writes: "How do we even begin to process all of this—this cataclysm that is happening simultaneously in slow motion and all at once, on distant continents and inside our own cells?"

“Months in,” (and remember, he was writing this in May!)
“we still have no idea when it will end
or what we will all come out looking like.

The metamorphoses are happening mostly in private,
all over the place, in billions of individual pods—
acts of internal self-destruction and rebuilding, subtle shifts
and whole revolutions.”

How do we begin to process all of this?”

Well, good question!

And maybe one answer is that we don’t have to go through it
alone.

With all due respect to the more-than-competent builders and
renovators in this community (and there are a few)...

Most of us need a little help to do an Extreme Home
Makeover.

Fortunately, help is available, from many corners.

Good friends, close family members,
people here in the congregation who know how to listen well,
including people on the Pastoral Care Team.

People who can bear witness to the changes you’re
undergoing, and to create safe space for you to reflect on
what’s happening.

Professionals can be helpful.

Psychotherapists, spiritual directors, Jungian analysts, life coaches, social workers and counselors of various kinds.

Support groups such as the wide range of 12 Step programs: which are based on foundational spiritual principles.

We can find teachers who can assist us.

Browse the spirituality, religion or self-help section of any library or bookstore, or search for them on YouTube.

You'll find yourself drawn to the voices best suited to you.

They could be teachers from long ago or contemporary writers...and whether they're Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Sufi, Jungian, Unitarian, "interspiritual" or something else entirely.

And of course, we can find comfort, reassurance and connection with the sacred through art, music and poetry...whether it's created by others or by ourselves.

All of these companions, and more, can reassure us that our feelings of discomfort amidst painful change are normal...

That we can learn to release our desire to have things go our way, as we open ourselves to the transformative embrace of Life.

Of course, this is a continual practice...not something we learn and “get” once and for all.

In the continual process of growth and change, we need to keep doing that inner renovation work:

The work that will allow us to live with more kindness, grace and courage.

As the poet Mark Nepo writes, in a book called “The Endless Practice: Becoming Who You Were Born to Be”:

“We are daily at the crossroads, trying to turn our heaviness into light.

When faced with uncertainty, we’re asked to practice patience.

When faced with opportunity, we’re asked to practice trust.

When faced with a need for courage, we’re asked to do small things with love.

When faced with disconnection, we’re asked to remember how to hold and listen.”³

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³ Mark Nepo, *The Endless Practice: Becoming Who You Were Born to Be* (Atria: New York, 2014), 18.

Just as the caterpillar does not choose to go into its cocoon,
we too have been moved inside our houses by factors beyond
our control.

In the days, weeks and months to come,
may we trust the transformations we are undergoing
are ultimately for our good...
and for the good of the Greater Whole.

May we find peace
in the humble cocoons of our lives...

Taking a few more moments now
to rest in quiet contemplation...

as we are made, and re-made, always...
by the Creative Power of Life.

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