ABSTRACT. This essay reflects on personal transformative experiences as explored using ideas from transformative learning, developmental perspectives and the practice of spiritual direction. This reflects the multidisciplinary, relationally based perspectives that are useful in exploring transformation when spirituality is an essential dimension of understanding the meaning of critical incidents or events in one’s life. Using the metaphor of spinning a kaleidoscope to identify memories that elucidate critical transitions in a personal narrative, there are memories from childhood, early professional life and recent events which afford an opportunity to revisit and explore the meaning of those events. The essay provides insight into the practice of spiritual direction that has similar parallels in clinical practice. These parallels include: the importance of attending to the relationship; of paying attention to one’s own stillness and silence; and of engaging the other in owning the transformative power of insights from their explorations. doi:10.1300/J497v76n04_15

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Transformational experiences viewed kaleidoscopically afford a framework for this essay. Kaleidoscopes make it possible to examine
beautiful symmetrical forms which become observable through mirrors that reflect patterns made by bits of colored glass. The colors change constantly based on movement of the tube or frame holding the colored bits of glass (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 1973). My reflections on transformation have spun in many directions. When theory spins the kaleidoscope, transformation can be viewed as an important dimension of clinical practice that reflects multidisciplinary, relationally based perspectives. Jack Mezirow (1990, 1991) uses a critical theory analysis to understand transformation. He defines transformative learning as the process of effecting change in a frame of reference, that is, in the structured assumptions through which we understand our experiences. Frames of reference (habits of mind) are composed of broad, abstract, habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that are rooted in cultural, social, educational, economic, political, or psychological codes. They can also be understood as constellations of belief, value judgments, attitudes, and feelings that shape a particular world view. They result from an interaction between cultural assimilation and the influences of primary caregivers. Frames of reference (may?) change when actions do not work as we anticipate, and it becomes necessary to modify habitual assumptions to solve the problem. Transformational learning results from critically reflecting on assumptions, examining constellations of belief through discourse, and initiating action-based on reflective insight and continual assessment. Intuitive, imaginative processes characterize such learning (Mezirow, 1991; Mezirow et al., 1990).

Robert Kegan (1994) provides a postmodern perspective on transformation. He has charted the evolving movement of consciousness across the life span in ways that allow us to engage Mezirow’s critical perspectives on discourse and insight with the context of relationships. Kegan presents a framework of five orders of consciousness, which has similarities to other developmental frameworks. He discusses orders of consciousness as occurring from the earliest infancy through early adulthood where he explores movements from being shaped by one’s environment to having an internal authority by which we name what is valuable and respond to the demands and opportunities we encounter to a self-transforming consciousness that recognizes the limitations of the ways we make meaning of our experiences. Self-transforming consciousness allows for creating a way to hold contradictions, opposites, ambiguity, or multiple systems of thinking. Kegan’s work focuses on what order of consciousness will allow human beings to respond positively to the demands of a pluralistic postmodern culture (Debold, 2002).
I find Kegan’s way of paying attention to the idea of transformation processes of particular salience for my own reflections. Transformation requires that we reflect on the way we know allowing us to recognize that what we have been taking as reality is actually only a construction of reality. What gradually happens is not just an acquisition of more and more assumptions and beliefs but a qualitative shift or spin of the kaleidoscope of the context and content of one’s world (Debold, 2002). The personal reflections in this essay on transformation begin with spinning the kaleidoscope.

Spinning the kaleidoscope of memories of moments of transformation, I paused with reflections on my parents’ deaths and my extended family. My father’s death when I was seven and my mother’s death when I was twelve left me with an enormous sense of abandonment. Memories of my father’s death were of hours spent in hospital waiting rooms with brief moments spent with him. My mother died at home. Most difficult was her request for me to leave the room. Hearing about her death from my seat under the backyard trees was truly a sense of being abandoned by my mother who loved me deeply. I experienced another form of abandonment by a God whom she had taught me to love whose action allowed her to die. What had I done to deserve such losses? This was the question that settled into the core of my spirit. In spite of these experiences of abandonment and the question, I found myself being held by in a loving, supportive extended family. The care by my aunt and uncle gave me a sense of connectedness and appreciation for our extended family where non-relatives, strangers, and friends were welcomed to our home. An important family value was practicing faith, which was expressed through religious traditions that included family members from African Methodist Episcopal and Roman Catholic traditions. Other values included care for those in need, especially elderly members of the community, and service to the community through civil rights organizations and African American sororities.

Another spin of the kaleidoscope moves to a transformative moment in understanding the complexity of racism as a young social worker. In the mid-sixties I was working as a group work supervisor in a neighborhood center. One of the groups I was responsible for was boys in early adolescence. There was an incident in a local store where one of the boys had been accused of shoplifting. After the manager searched him and could not find anything that the boy had not paid for, the manager slapped him. This enraged the community, resulting in a fire in the store and a demonstration. Those of us who worked in the center found ourselves caught between the children, adult members of the community
and the police trying to negotiate a peaceful breakup of the demonstration. As I stood immobilized by the anger, the fire, and the movement of the police, firemen and community, one of the young boys in my group moved next to me and said, “Miss Jacobs, you should go home.” I look into the eyes of one so young and yet so wise about what happening, how vulnerable I was, and I said thank you as I left to go home. The complexities of racism and classism were overwhelming as I realized that the days we spent attempting to negotiate a peaceful settlement were lost in the image of a burning building. What knowledge and skills did I need to be a more effective social worker? How could I move towards protecting the young boys in my group rather than having them protect me? Would going on for my masters in social work make a difference in my ability to negotiate race, power, and privilege? I carried the memory of the children of that community as I went back to school.

A third spin of the kaleidoscope brings me to a late night discussion 20 years ago with alumni of color who were concerned about difficult experiences from their student days; I remember feelings of being tired and overwhelmed with the inability to either explain the past or offer solutions for the future. I had an overwhelming desire to escape the intensity of the conversation. I kept saying to one alumna that there was nothing I could do about the past. She finally said to me, “I only want you to listen.” That experience stays with me as a reminder of what it means for self and the other to discover the capacity to stay in the relationship while listening to painful memories. The experience of intensity and aloneness in the pain changes in the process of the other where she has space to tell her story and to heal from her painful memories when there is space for compassionate listening. The experience of that moment was transformative for me as it moved me further on the journey of understanding how witnessing pain affects my internal spaces and of longing to wait in attentive silence for the other to tell her story and the joy of witnessing to the many ways the other claims the healing that occurs in retelling to those who will listen.

A fourth spin of the kaleidoscope brings me to the memories of the transformation of my relationship with God. In 1988 I decided to make a 30-day retreat according to the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius. It was a profound experience of prayer and silence. My spiritual director for this retreat provided scripture and other materials for reflection. During those days I had a strong sense of a judging God who loved me but loved my parents more as he took them away from me. I have made peace with this loss and with my relationship to God as I realize how much I had been cared for by an extended family and others in my life.
Judgmental and compassionate symbolized God in my life; this image had been with me in silence for years. The time of retreat provided the opportunity to transform that image. As a result, the God of judging scales weighing my actions, thoughts, and beliefs became the God of the anchor who was there to create stability and security in stormy seas. My image of God became an anchor that could be dropped down in safe harbors or hauled up for traveling across the seas. The change in image gave me the very deepening awareness of my capacity to write a different narrative based on reflection and perspective. Developmental and dynamic theorists view the relationship with internal images as the material for changing external behavior. What changes is consciousness itself; becoming aware of the essential in life, in both the outer and inner worlds.

As a social work educator and spiritual director, I am concerned with the place of spirituality and religious beliefs or practices in the lives of clients. Perspectives on spiritual direction enrich our understanding and appreciation of spiritual perspectives and practices as they facilitate and block the realization of human potential. Stillness, attention, and the relationship are at the heart of both spiritual direction and clinical practice.

For the reader unfamiliar with spiritual direction as a transformative process, it is useful to provide a definition of spiritual direction and the setting of such work. Spiritual direction is the art of listening in the context of a trusting relationship. Usually, the director has undergone a training or certificate program to be a guide who companions another person, listening to their life story with an ear for the movement of the sacred. It is important to note that God is the director and the person as director is really one who companions helping the person or directee to uncover and discovery the movements of God in their life. Spiritual direction, mentoring, or companioning guiding, have been part of many religious traditions for centuries and may find different expressions and settings in Eastern or other non-Christian religions. In a spiritual direction session there may be a candle, plant or something that is symbolic of the sacred in the context of the session. The session begins and ends in the context of prayer, spoken or unspoken by the director and/or the directee. Discernment or uncovering the sacred in the lives of the other is based on the intimate engagement of two people sharing the directee’s journey with God. It allows the space for the directee to give voice or language to the spiritual experience, interpretation of the current narratives of life stories and exploration of choices.
Stillness is embodied by W.B. Yeats’ quote: “We can make our minds so like still water that being gather about us that they may see, it may be, their own images, and so live for a moment with a clearer, perhaps even with a fiercer life because of our quiet” (Yeats, 1981). Mark Epstein explores attention from both a Buddhist and psychoanalytic perspectives. He defines attention as the clear and single-minded awareness of what actually happens to us and in us at the successive moments of perception (Epstein, 1995). This kind of paying attention of observing the mind, emotions and body is in Buddhist psychology healing in itself. The relationship invites us to a place where we seek to listen to the other in a spirit of authenticity, openness and honesty. When using the definition of spirituality by Griffith and Griffith, one views relationships in the context of spirituality. “Spirituality as the commitment to choose, as the primary context for understanding and acting, one’s relatedness with all that is” (Griffith & Griffith, 2002). Relationship is at the center of awareness of the interactions in spiritual direction and in clinical practice.

Coming to stillness is an essential step in paying attention. For the noise created by the external environment, interior exhaustion and defenses blocking interior silence and stillness also block the capacity to pay attention. Interior silence and stillness allows us to move away from enslavement of the internalization of constructs or points of view.

Paying attention allows a gentle holding and awareness of others and our experiences of the unfreedom of social constructs that limit our freedom to be who we are in this universe. The quality of paying attention is a clear expression of the value placed on relationships. Once you meet on the ground of “being with,” there is a shift, affectively, into spaces of acceptance.

The relationship is informed by the dynamic processes that ask of the director and clinician to pay attention to her/his internal processes while listening to the many meanings attached to the directee or clients’ narrative. As I spin the kaleidoscope around the experiences of my vocation as a spiritual director, I find common ground with clinicians in listening to the lives of others.

At the heart of the direction relationship is the acknowledgement of a transcendent other that is important in the development of the director and directee. The purpose of spiritual direction is to become more attentive to the transcendent other, to develop the relationship and to live out of the consequences of this relationship. Most people come to spiritual direction with a desire for help on their faith or spiritual journey. They are open to a transformation that supports making crucial life decisions.
The transformative experiences of the relationship are found in those moments of remembering and meaning-making that include ways of interpretation and insight, which then includes the wisdom of the client and his/her experience of the transcendent. The transcendent other may be experienced as God, creation, higher power, ancestors, or saints. The person shares his or her thoughts, dreams, fears, hopes, hurts, and perceptions of life events. My role is to be a listening, supportive person who creates a holding environment where one can look at his or her relationship with the transcendent other as it is lived out in everyday life. I bring to the relationship an awareness of how my spiritual journey and religious beliefs as an African American woman and a practicing Roman Catholic both block and facilitate my ability to pay attention to the dynamics operative in the lives of those who come for direction. I have found the Zen practice of sitting as a deep entry into the stillness which gently holds my many identities in ways that limit their obscuring the view and views of the other. Stillness invites me to move into a quiet grounding of self that allows me to pay attention to the other’s presence and communication, both verbally and nonverbally, the particular narrative that brings them into our session with the hope for clarity as to its meaning in their life. It is a space for clarity to rise from the fog of uncertainty as one engages active listening that enables a holding environment for the person to reflect back on the meaning of her/his particular issue. Recently a woman that I had seen for several years returned to spiritual direction after a two year hiatus. When I asked why she was returning she said that it was because she trusted that I would remember and be able to remind her of the transformative moments in her journey so that she could face the next difficult decision knowing that she had the strength to live through the process and implications of her choices. The relationship is essential in the transformational process for both the spiritual director and clinician and the other.

Losing and finding one’s voice is an essential dimension of transformation for both. For the individual, many of life’s events, be they joyful or traumatic, are triggers for transformation (Scott, 1997). A sense of loss or change in joy or sorrow can result in grieving a past state and is integral to moving through transformation. Internal and external events can trigger transformation when an old way of seeing or doing is challenged and changed to a new way of seeing/doing or being.

Scott’s article, “The Grieving Soul in the Transformation Process,” identifies the way that transformation occurs. She discusses how grieving connotes loss, a loss of a loved one, of a place, of a time, or of a way of making meaning that worked in the past. There is loss of a connection
to the soul, experienced as a longing and wanting to let go of what stands in the way. It is one of the most potent of the processes involved in both a rational and extrarational transformation. It occurs when a person’s meaning perspectives are challenged or when there is transition in the life-death cycle (Scott, 1997).

The sitting (listening or waiting) with the images requires us to descend into a kind of darkness. It requires a quiet space before the internal images can be attended to, and this requires a readiness, willingness, and openness. The body is related to the shell of the rational ego structure and experiences things through the skin and subsequently the muscles, and holds the information there. Through bodywork, ego quieting, and internal work with images that emerge, the grieving process commences. It permits suffering to gestate a new solution, a transformation in its own way and its own time. Healing occurs then not only because the meaning or image is found, but also because the process of life is given attention and empathetic presence and a mirroring that touches it wherever it is (Scott, 1997).

Transformative moments occurring in two life stories have affected the constantly transforming kaleidoscope of my own story. I am not a distant observer of the authors of these stories; I was aware of the relationship, noticing those turning points as transformative moments as Adam and Donna find their voices.

Adam was a young Italian American Catholic man who had a desire to develop his relationship with God. At the heart of his struggles and desire was fear and longing for intimacy. He struggled with closeness with his wife and children. He came to see me because he wanted a guide through praying scriptures as a way to develop a relationship. During one of our early sessions where he expressed a concern that using scripture was not getting him anywhere, I asked if there were times when he felt God’s presence. He spoke of his work as a carpenter and that he would go to work early in the morning and would sing to the new wood before he began work. He spoke of those times when he lost his singing voice as times when he was in major transitions between jobs or major geographic moves. During those times he felt he had no identity. Singing is central to his sense of self and gives him a place, an identity in the community. As he spoke of the loss of self in his music, he felt a wholeness; a sense of unity with the transcendent other, of finding, losing and gaining the strengths and depth of his voice. As I reflected on when I asked the question of Adam’s sense of God’s presence, I found myself struggling with my question of abandonment. Why was God absent to someone who desired a connection? In my peer supervision group, I
discovered the lurking question of my own abandonment and experienced a compassionate group that allowed me to sit in silence and to experience their presence as supportive in the void of not knowing where God was in this relationship. Zen sitting became an important practice for me as I was able to hold ambiguity and uncertainty, and not knowing.

Donna is an African American protestant minister in her early forties. She is highly regarded by other pastors and members of her denomination. In our first meeting she identified herself as an overweight lesbian, adult child of alcoholic parents. She wanted me to know that she is a lesbian; however, she is not out to her colleagues and parishioners because this would mean the loss of her position as pastor. She was referred to me because she wanted someone who could understand racial issues and her spiritual journey. Recently, her lesbian partner had left her and taken the child for whom she had been a second parent. The loss of both the partner and the child in her life was quite painful. She had spent time in therapy dealing with the loss.

Donna’s prayer life consisted of scripture study in preparation for preaching. When I offered suggestion of silence or meditation as prayer disciplines, she looked at me with disbelief and amazement that I would suggest these disciplines as legitimate ways of praying. While a composer of music, it was for others to be drawn to God. Music was a job not a joy in her life. Her relationship to God was of great distance and judgment. It was only when she fell in love and established a positive lesbian relationship in her life that she began to sing of the intimacy and love of God for her. Tapes of the compositions she shared with me were energetic, full of life and her presence. The music she shared with me spoke of life and joy in ways that clearly reflected those positive experiences in her life that had moved her to clearly articulating and accepting her identities as being positive and healthy in the context of her relationship with God.

What does spinning a kaleidoscope through transformative moments in my personal and professional life say about transformative moments? I think the developmental perspectives on one’s internal and external worlds are important. Here one’s reflections on those frames of reference developed through cultural contexts, early relationships and life stages that provide opportunities for future reflection, re-authoring, and transformation. Crisis, loss, grieving, and discomfort invite transforming old frames to new frames and the recognition of the personal power of giving voice to the process and change. Stillness, paying attention, exploring relationships from both personal and professional contexts
affords opportunities to examine the many meanings of transformative life moments.

In thinking about this essay, the image of spinning the kaleidoscope was personally significant. I began thinking about ideas of margins around a center and concluded that that image no longer fit how I see myself through experiences of transformation. I became clearer that the experience of having all of my identities interacting at various moments of my life was a much truer picture. The kaleidoscope allows for movement and holding patterns that are influenced by the expanse of the container, the force of the spin, the way it is held and the direction of the light. There are many possibilities of different patterns or interpretations of the design. There are many ways to write a narrative based on spinning the kaleidoscope of one’s memories. Underlying such narratives are: the importance of relationship, of witnessing to stories unfolding, of authenticity, of being nonjudgmental, of creating a holding environment essential for the transformative process, the acknowledgement that boundaries between self and other are permeable given our potential for self-authoring, for self-transforming. And finally that the quality of paying attention to transformative opportunities invites us to the energy within and among us, attention to new ways of know, being, to being held gently and radically shaken, to be open to the creative mystery of transformation.

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