INCARNATIONAL TRAINING FRAMEWORK

A TRAINING GUIDE FOR DEVELOPING INCARNATIONAL LEADERS ENGAGED IN CITY TRANSFORMATION

BY KRIS ROCKE AND JOEL VAN DYKE
In this chapter, we offer brief reflections on the nature of transformation inherent in the Incarnational Training Framework.

There is a fundamental assumption that animates and energizes the Incarnational Training Framework. We assume that transformation is not only possible, but it is always happening if we have the eyes to see it. In fact, though it is not always obvious, all of creation is undergoing the process of being transformed (Col. 1:20, Rev. 21:5). This is not a dreamy hope for us. It is a given.

Catholic theologian James Alison suggests that the movement from impossibility to responsibility is the normative pattern of transformation. It’s the process by which things come into being. We don’t make this happen as much as we cooperate with it. We can all name something that used to be “impossible” but is now quite “normal” (e.g. riding a bike, being a parent, making friends with our enemies). Over time and with much practice we find ourselves doing things that formerly seemed impossible.

The Book of Acts is a great illustration of this process in action. In virtually every chapter, the disciples find themselves experiencing what had formerly seemed impossible. With each “new normal,” they search for new language to make sense of what they experience and accept greater responsibility for what they encounter. The high point of this process is in Acts 10 when God pours out the Spirit on Gentiles. As a result, Peter has to confront his own racism, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (Acts 10:16).

Martin Kahler captured this pattern with his dictum, “Mission is the mother of theology.” In other words, the Spirit is always ahead of us at work in the city, expanding the
reach of God’s love and calling us into what seems impossible. The ever-expanding mission of God forces us to find new theological categories to explain what is happening. Eventually we accept responsibility for the new normal made possible by the Spirit at work among us.

The word “transformation” is currently in vogue, and widely used by all kinds of city-serving groups to describe the impact of their work. It is a large claim, one that often seems more like a marketing strategy than a deep conviction about what is actually happening.

To clarify our use of the word, we distinguish it from “growth.” Growth is primarily concerned with improvement. Training for growth tends to use tips and techniques to make leaders bigger, better, faster and stronger versions of what they already are. We might call this the “good to great” model. Growth is necessary and vital, but our focus is on transformation and the transformational process of leaders and movements that love the city.

Transformation is the process by which something comes into being. It is about becoming. It is the process by which something becomes itself—its True Self as Thomas Merton would say. Transformation is not when a dog becomes a cat, or duck becomes horse. It’s more like when a caterpillar becomes a butterfly.

We catch a glimpse of this at the Transfiguration of Jesus. To be transfigured is not to become something different altogether, but to become something more beautiful, elevated, transcendent or luminous. On the mountain we see the Incarnate Jesus of Nazareth become the cosmic Christ. In this sense, transformation is the beautification of something. It’s when a curse becomes a blessing. It’s when ego gives way to essence. It’s when the False Self yields to the True Self. It’s when the last are first and the first are last. The ultimate expression of this is Easter morning when death is transformed into new life and a band of frightened disciples are transformed into a community of courageous souls.

When God says, “See, I am making all things new” (Revelation 21:5), He doesn’t mean that transformation is pie-in-the-sky hope. It is actually the concrete reality of God’s love at work in the present. It is happening now. It is happening here. It is happening in this world.

It’s this kind of spiritual vision that inspired the poet Denise Levertov in her poem, “City
Psalm.” It serves as a kind of anthem for us. In it she declares that even in the midst of horrible pain and misfortune, there is an “abode of mercy.” Inspired by the vision of God’s abundance, she says, “I saw paradise in the dust of the street.”

This is not a romantic vision that denies pain and misfortune. Quite the contrary, it frees us to speak honestly and unflinchingly about the whole of reality—the good, the bad and the ugly, and to do so with authority. But it never lets us slip into cynicism or despair. It frees us to see as God sees.

The following assumptions about the nature of transformation are foundational to the framework.

**SEEING – THE LIGHT OF TRANSFORMATION**

Stanley Hauerwas says, “We can only act within the world we see.” We are creatures who act in light of what we see. There is no other path to action.

If Hauerwas is right, then the most urgent task of city transformation is to attend to what and how we see. Transforming sight is the most basic and fundamental task of In-
carnational leadership. This is what Jesus did. The Incarnation opens our eyes and transforms our sight.

The Incarnation insists that what sits behind our eyes is as important as what sits in front of our eyes. It insists that for those who have the eyes to see, God is at work everywhere, always calling forth life from death. Incarnational vision allows us to see God in all things. There is nowhere that God is not. Richard Rohr says, “We cannot, not be in the presence of God.” Madeline L’Engle said, “There is nothing so secular that it cannot be sacred, and that is one of the deepest messages of the Incarnation.” As a result, we do not bring the Gospel anywhere; we bear witness to the Gospel everywhere. This is why we can see and celebrate Good News in hard places. That is what incarnational leaders do, they act within the world they see and it calls forth what already is, God in all things.

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READ

Geography of Grace (Book)
Seeing a New Thing - Ch. 17
Written by Kris Rocke and Joel Van Dyke

This chapter captures the essence of the truth behind the fact that we can only act upon the world that we can see.

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Revisionist History (Podcast)
The Foot Soldier of Birmingham - S02E04
Hosted by Malcolm Gladwell

Gladwell revisits the story captured in the most iconic photograph of the civil rights movement. He asks the people in the famous photograph what they think happened that day. It’s more complicated than it looks.

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Video: TED Talk (Video)
Can Art Amend History?
Featuring Titus Kaphar, Artist

Kaphar’s paintings and sculptures wrestle with the struggles of the past while speaking of the diversity and advances of the present. He invites us to shift our gaze and confront unspoken truth in artistic expression.

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WWW.STREETPSALMS.ORG/ITF/CHAPTER3
RELATIONSHIP – THE TECHNOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATION

Cities are transformed at the same level they are created. They are transformed relationally. We are socially constructed beings. There is no achievement or failure at the personal or societal level that is not the product of an intricate web of relationships. All of reality is relational, whether at the quantum or cosmic level. Therefore all of life is healed relationally. (Sometimes this involves highly technical expressions of relationship such as complex geopolitical, environmental or social interventions, but all acts of healing are done in and through the power of relationship). There is nothing that is not related.

Bill Milliken, who has served high-risk urban youth for five decades, is often asked “Which program really can transform lives?” He says, “I’ve been doing this for 50 years, I’ve never seen a program transform a life. The only thing that can transform a life is a relationship.”

Knowing how to activate, leverage and steward the power of relationship is the technology of transformation. Programs, initiatives, and city serving organizations are like the hardware that need the software of relationship to work. What’s more is that if relationship is real it is always a two way street, which means authentic transformation is always mutual. In the end, all parties are transformed.

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When Poor is Rich: Transformative Power of I-Thou Relationships in a Brazilian Favela (Article)
Written by Mary Grace Neville
Neville explores the creation of “relational wealth” found in the boundary of rich human contact holding to the notion that fostering humanness holds potential for transformation and social change.

LISTEN

Replacing Church (Podcast)
Closer to the Edge - Episode 54
 Featuring Ron Ruthruff
Ben Katt hosts an interview that centers on the transformation that occurs through learning how to listen to, understand and value people with experiences different from your own.

WATCH

Video: TED Talk (Video)
Social Services Are Broken. How Can We Fix Them?
 Featuring Hillary Cottam, Social Entrepreneur
Cottam shares three stories that reveal how authentic relationships have the power to solve the deepest and most complex social problems.

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LOVE — THE HEART OF TRANSFORMATION

Things that are loved become loveable. Unfortunately, movements that set out to “transform” the city do not always (or often) result in people loving their city, especially its most vulnerable members. When cities are seen through the lens of our consumer culture and market fundamentalism, they become objects that we use instead of living, breathing organisms that we love. G.K. Chesterton reflected on how cities “grow great.” He said, “Men did not love Rome because she was great, she was great because they had loved her.”

City transformation happens when people fall in love with their city. When people love their city, then over time their city bears the mark of that love. The power to transform cities is located in love, and love is always perfected in weakness. Which means that everyone can participate! Everyone can love their city in big ways and small, rich and poor, young and old, activists and academics, Christian and other faith traditions—all are called to love their city and in doing so participate in its transformation. Paul is right . . . in the end three things transform a city, “Faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13).

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Orthodoxy (Book Excerpt)
Quote from G.K. Chesterton
Chesterton discusses how cities grow great.

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99% Invisible (Podcast)
In and Out of Love - Episode 71
Features the turf battle between city planners and skaters about JFK Plaza in Philadelphia, better known as “Love Park.”

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TEDx (Video)
For the Love of Cities
Featuring Peter Kageyama
Kageyama speaks on how loving our cities by adding the human heart into the toolbox of community and economic development will create not just livable cities, but lovable cities.

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DESIRE — THE LIFEbloOD OF TRANSFORMATION

Transformation happens at the level of desire. Human beings are created in and through desire and have a highly developed capacity to imitate desire. It’s what makes us human and sets us apart from all other animals. Unlike instincts, (i.e. survival, food, reproduction) which are hardwired into our biology, desires are “mimetic” or imitated and culturally-conditioned. We imitate or borrow the desires of others. As anthropologist René Girard suggests, “We desire according to the desire of others.” He calls this “mimetic desire.”

Marketing agencies understand mimetic desire quite well. For example, a pair of “Air Jordans” is the object of our desire. The shoe is desirable not because there is something inherently desirable about the shoes, but because “I want to be like Mike.” Marketers advertise models, not products. That’s mimesis.

We are easily deceived into thinking that there is a direct relationship between us and the object of our desire, as if we really do want the thing we seek. However, as marketers understand, Subject A does not desire Object B in any direct sense. Suffering the loss of this illusion is essential to transformation. The object of our desire, whether a pair of shoes, a car, a house, or even a person, is always mediated by Model C, who makes the object desirable to us. When it comes to desire, it’s the model that matters most. In this sense, desire is triadic, not dyadic. We want what we want because our desires have been modeled for us by another.

Our capacity to imitate each other is largely good and is what makes the bonds of human community function. Unfortunately, our highly developed mimetic capacity leads to conflict as we compete for the objects of our affection, not realizing that what we are really competing for is each other. In an attempt to bring peace and minimize
the rivalries sparked by competing desires, we create scapegoats. Scapegoats bring temporary peace to unstable communities. When Jesus invites us to imitate him he shows us a way out of this cycle of violence. He shows us how to borrow our desires from God—to imitate the One in whom there is no violence. All desire in God is non-rivalistic. The Son imitates the Father in the Spirit of self-giving non-rivalry (mutuality). This pattern of desire calls forth an entirely new way of being human, which is the hope of the world.

When we imitate Jesus and practice Christ-like desire we unplug from the rivalries that lead to violence and open the way to real and lasting peace. Christ-like desire allows us to live scapegoat-free lives. Awakening and modeling such desire is the work of transformation.

See Appendix C for further reflections on Girard’s anthropology of desire and why it is so vital to the work of incarnational leadership in an urban context written by Dave Hillis, President of Leadership Foundations.
SCANDAL — THE STUMBLING BLOCK OF TRANSFORMATION

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests that transformation is an ongoing process of orientation-disorientation-reorientation. He sees this pattern in the life of Israel. The place of “disorientation” is what others have called “threshold” or “crossroads” experiences. It is sometimes referred to as “liminal space.” Jesus uses a more provocative word—he calls it the place of “scandal.” It is a dangerous but necessary place to occupy if we are to be transformed.

Christian anthropologist René Girard points out that scandal (scandalizo) is a technical word in the New Testament often translated as “offense” or “stumbling block.” Scandal is anything that sparks or inflames rivalry, thus creating the conditions for violence. This is why Jesus said, “Woe to those by whom the scandal comes” (Matt. 18:7). Scandal has the dual capacity to simultaneously fascinate and repel, which is why we are so easily entrapped by it.

“The scandal must come,” says Jesus (Matt. 18:7). There is no way around it. It is an unavoidable dilemma and a delicate matter that is largely ignored in most spiritual teaching and leadership training. The scandal takes various forms, and Jesus warns against most of them. But there is also a holy scandal—the scandalous grace of Jesus himself. This is the paradox of the gospel. The grace-filled actions and teachings of Jesus that offend/scandalize the disciples also frees them. To suffer the scandal is to see the way
we are constituted in rivalry with others and God. It is to suffer the loss of our own innocence and the loss of the “God” who protects it. Both must go! It's the first step of the 12 Step program. Entrapment can easily lead to violence, but when confessed it can also lead to effacement.

The scandal must come as it did for John the Baptist who was deeply troubled by Jesus’ radical acts of mercy. Jesus responded, “Blessed is he who is not offended/scandalized by me” (Luke 7:23). The city is a crucible of scandal that calls forth the mercy of Christ. The challenge is that the mercy that is so desperately needed is also the thing that so easily offends. This is the paradox of transformation.
PRAYER, PRAISE AND PAIN — THE GATEWAYS TO TRANSFORMATION

Thomas Merton said, “The gate of heaven is everywhere.” That’s true, but we’ve identified three of life’s primary gateways to transformation: prayer, praise, and pain.

The narrowest and least used gateway is prayer. It’s the one that seems to open most slowly, though over time it may be the surest and most trustworthy of all the gateways. However, if we are honest, as poet Mary Karr suggests, prayer for most of us is like being roasted slowly on a hot spit over an open fire. Fortunately, the form of prayer does not seem to matter to God. It’s enough just to show up. Merton declares, “There is an absolute need for the solitary, bare, dark, beyond thought, beyond feeling type of prayer . . . Unless that dimension is there in the Church somewhere, the whole caboodle lacks life and light and intelligence. It is a kind of hidden, secret, unknown stabilizer and compass too. About this I have no hesitation or doubts.

The gateway of praise opens more easily. Great beauty awakens our soul to its own worth and the worth of others. Beauty begets beauty, opening us up. When we see great beauty “out there,” we feel it “in here.” A soul that feels its own worth and the worth of others magnifies the Lord. Having received the beauty of the Christ in her womb, Mary declared, “My soul magnifies the Lord” (Luke 1:46). It’s a stunning claim—somehow God actually grows when our soul feels its worth.

Prayer and praise are essential to city transformation, but the widest gateway is pain. For most (adults) it is the only thing strong enough to awaken us to reality. For pain to be redemptive, we must change our relationship to it, or as Richard Rohr says, “If we do not transform our experience of pain, we will transmit it.” Our wounds and the wounds of our cities can become wombs that bear seeds of new life if we let them.

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Pain as a Gateway of Transformation
Written by Joel Van Dyke
Van Dyke explores the relationship between Hagar and the wives of gang members in Guatemala City.

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Voices of the Global Church
Practicing Hospitality & Mission
Featuring Ruth Padilla DeBorst
Biblical hospitality, theological formation, and intentional community in Latin America.

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Go Forth to Work (Commercial)
Produced for Levi Strauss
Braddock, PA learns to reimagine itself and rebuild after the drug crime epidemic and economic downturn that led to its decline.
CHAPTER 3 TRANSFORMING ASSUMPTIONS

METAPHOR — THE LANGUAGE OF TRANSFORMATION

Joseph Campbell said, “If you want to change the world, you have to change the metaphor.” Jesus was the master teacher in this regard. He was always changing the metaphor to awaken people, sometimes forcefully. He realized that we are formed powerfully by language and images. He also realized that language is limited, it conceals as much as it reveals. Language that once was liberating can, over time, become a trap that holds us hostage without us even knowing it. This is the gift and curse of language. It is dualistic by nature, dividing reality and separating things. So language must be continuously transcended if it is to remain a gift.

The mystics and contemplatives are of great help here. Thomas Keating reminds us, “God’s first language is silence.” The prophet Elijah met God in the “sound of sheer silence” (1 Kings 19:12), and Jesus would often retreat to pray in silence. Silence opens space that language closes and blocks, which is why we need large doses of silence, especially as we get older. And yet, we are creatures of language, and transformation takes place at the level of language for most of us, which is why Jesus is so playful and daring with it.

C.S. Lewis writes beautifully about the iconoclastic nature of Jesus with regards to language and images:

Images, I must suppose have their use or they would not have been so popular. To me however, their danger is more obvious. Images of the Holy easily become holy images—sacrosanct. My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great Iconoclast. Could we not almost say that this shattering is one of the marks of His presence? The incarnation (Word made flesh) is the supreme example; it leaves all previous ideas of the Messiah in ruins.

Jesus’ parables and his public theater tease, confuse, provoke and disorient, much like Zen Koans do in Buddhism. They subvert logic and frustrate the mind. Jesus’ stories and actions have a time-release quality that renew the mind (Rom. 12:2). They get inside and work on us. Western education is almost entirely geared to the mind, but a well-defended mind cannot be renewed by arguments, doctrines and precepts. Direct confrontation almost always entrenches the mind deeper into its circular logic. The better route is an indirect kind that Jesus models for us masterfully. He renewed the mind by opening the eyes of the heart. “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will
know what is the hope of His calling” (Eph. 1:18).

Jesus’ method of communication is a Socratic method, also called maieutic communication. Great spiritual teachers have modeled this for us. It is form of midwifery of the soul that draws out and calls forth “truth” that is latent in the other. It does not impose, it evokes. This method creates space for truth to do its work gracefully, though sometimes it can be quite painful. Great spiritual teachers help us discover our deepest intuitions and recognize what we already know to be true. In the end our greatest “discoveries,” feel more like remembrances. We say to ourselves, “Of course, I knew that!”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do the assumptions listed affirm or challenge your own assumptions regarding transformation?

2. How do the assumptions listed affirm or challenge the community you serve?

3. Imagine how your city might look different if it lived into assumptions.

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READ

Geography of Grace (Book)
Riddles of Grace - Ch. 11
By Kris Rocke and Joel Van Dyke

Rocke and Van Dyke explore the use of metaphor as used by Jesus in the series of parables describing the Kingdom of Heaven.

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City as Playground (Podcast)
Bible as Urban Book (Episode 9)
Featuring Dr. Ray Bakke

Bakke describes the great paradigm shift from the Bible as rural book to the Bible as urban book and the crucial difference between the two.

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TED Ed (Video)
The Art of Metaphor (Video Clip)
Narrated by Jane Hirshfield

Hirshfield examines what makes a good metaphor and how they help us better understand the world. Metaphors bypass the logical mind and allow words to transcend their own meaning. They are handles on the doors of what we can know and imagine.

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