

We're in a Big Transition, aren't we? We're used to personal Big Transitions, or ones that affect a given family or a workplace or a faith community. But we're in a Big Transition on a society-level, even a global scale.

The onset of Quarantine in 2020 was the biggest society-level Transition of my lifetime. Coming out of it is too. Emily has a chapter in *Solus Jesus: A Theology of Repentance* on the Spirit. She talks about how societies don't undergo structural change without a massive infusion of energy. Andrea Walrath put her on to this. Covid may well be such a massive infusion of energy, with all sorts of effects: big changes in the workforce, huge infusions of cash through relief packages, changes in the way we do worship, work, education that may affect how we do all these things going into the future. Covid has increased society-wide attention to our great moral problems: racial justice, poverty, climate. The intensified cultural divide has brought some closer together, driven others further apart. Perhaps for most of us, a mix of both. A whole lotta shakin' goin' on.

In times like this, I like having the companionship of the ancient people who faced Big Transitions found in sacred texts like our Hebrew Bible and the New Testament writings. Yes, there are personal Big Transitions but also massive society level transitions—empires and kingdoms rising and falling affecting people at a very personal level. The letter to the Hebrews has this theme. Late in the letter there's a line that goes, **"Everything that can be shaken will be shaken...so that what cannot be shaken remains."** (Hebrews 12: 25-26) Before Jerry Lee Lewis and Maybelle Smith, there was the author of the letter to the Hebrews quoting Haggai.

Transitions are occasions for trepidation, anxiety, fear. In the same letter, Hebrews, fear of death is presented in Hebrews as the mother of all fears from which we need to be freed: **And he would free those who, by the fear of death, all their lives were subjected to bondage** (He. 2: 15)

*[Before I go any further, I want to say if you are in painful or fresh grief, talking about death can be either helpful or painful. I'm going to mention some anecdotes and findings from Near Death Experiences research. Nothing graphic. But I remember when I was in a fresh grief several years ago, and someone gave me a book on visions of the afterlife—I just wanted to throw it across the room. So, if you're in that place, practice good self-care and tune out for a while—one of the advantages of Zoom church, the volume control: we all run our own sound board!]*

OK, where were we? Transitions are occasions for fear and many of our lesser fears are linked to fear of death—if not fear of physical death, at least the fear significant loss.

In the gospels Jesus and disciples go through some harrowing experiences where their survival was in question. In Mark 4, they are crossing Sea of Galilee in a boat, when a sudden storm sweeps over them. How bad a storm? It says the **“the waves fell on them.”** Jesus is asleep in the stern of the boat at night. The disciples are in panic mode and wake him up. He calms the sea and then says to them, **“Why such cowards? Don’t you have any trust?”** [You only get to talk like that if you have just done people a great favor—otherwise, be more diplomatic] (Mk. 4:40)

But here’s what I notice: the antidote to fear isn’t courage, but trust. Same thing in Mark 5, again someone dealing a question of survival—an underlying fear in really Big Transitions. A synagogue ruler rushes to Jesus asking him to come tend to his sick daughter. Jesus goes with him. Messengers arrive to say, “Too late, she died. Don’t bother the teacher.” The crowd reacts, but just then Jesus and the synagogue ruler, have a moment together in the middle of the mayhem. And Jesus says to him, **“Don’t be afraid, only trust.”** (Mk. 5:36)

Again, trust, not courage is the antidote to fear.

There’s an important difference between trust and courage. Courage is like a boxer or any athlete before a big context, pumping up, heavy metal in their ear buds, steeling themselves. Courage is like ancient Irish warriors during the time of St. Patrick who terrified their enemies by stripping naked, yelling in unison, and then rushing at their foes. Trust is very different physically, emotionally, spiritually. Trust is something we relax into. Not clenched fist, open hand, more exhale than inhale, In AA, Let go, Let god is the trust mantra. Have you noticed that in your own experience, trust is more powerful than courage in the face of a big transition?

And now a pause for a book report. At the height of the third Covid surge, just before the amazingly effective Pfizer vaccine was announced, I was pretty nervous. AKA, afraid. You already think about death more as it becomes more likely with age.

So I was thinking a lot about my old friend **Phyllis Tickle** who died in 2015. Phyllis was very trusting in the face of death ever since I’d known her. She had a heart condition that could have taken her at any time. Turns out that her trust was yes, a fruit of her longstanding faith practices, but Phyllis traced it to a Near Death Experience she had as young woman. She had a severe reaction to a drug that shortly thereafter was taken off the market. She was in the ER and her heart stopped. And she had the classic NDE: the

tunnel, the light, etc. (Her husband, a doctor, was so skeptical about these things that Phyllis and he agreed not to talk about.)

So I'm thinking about Phyllis during this pre-vaccine surge, and my brother-in-law tells me about a book he's reading, *After*, by Bruce Greyson, a doctor at UM who became lead medical researcher on NDE's. In 1990's Christian publishing got a hold of some of the early research on NDE's and made a ton of money on lame books that spinned the research into Christian propaganda. I read one of those and was not impressed. But between Phyllis and my brother-in-law and the non-religious perspective of Bruce Greyson's book, and because I needed to nurture trust as an antidote to the fear I was experiencing. I was watching *Alone*, Season whatever and it's all about getting enough food and storing successfully in preparation for the arctic winter. Last December my trust was getting low and I needed to store some up in the face of one of life's unavoids: death, which was on my mind.

Greyson founded the International Society of Near Death Research which follows clinical research protocols and isn't attached to any religious framework.

He has personally interviewed thousands of people who had NDE and says in the general population 10-20% who come close to death, recall an NDE. That means 5% of the population. So you probably know someone who has had one. He also says many people don't like to talk about them—it's too intimate an experience, outside the normal, and often met with skepticism. BTW Prior religious orientation is not correlated to NDE—how the experiencer interprets the experience is.

Research notes common (not universal) features:

- Feeling outside the body (even seeing one's body from a distance)
- Going through a tunnel toward light
- Meeting loved ones who have died
- Often, encountering a divine figure
- Having the choice to go further in or return to the body
- Long term effects: increase altruism, compassion, gratitude, focus on the present moment, reduced fear of death. Sounds like a Trust Cocktail

Most intriguing part of the research is that the findings in some cases raise questions about the relationship between **minds** and **brains**. Old debate: is the mind simply a function of the physical brain or is there a function of mind that transcends the brain? Is there non-physical intelligence? All the major world religions, the experiences of indigenous people in traditional cultures would be say, of course, "mind" or non-

physical forms of intelligence exist and that they transcend the brain. So that's a key question.

A small portion of Near-Death experiences cannot be explained by the theory that mind is simply a function of the physical brain. Because people report access to information in the NDE that couldn't have come via their physical brain even it was fully conscious. Accurately recounting events or conversations that happened well out of the reach of their senses.

Another category: the person having a NDE meets a loved one who died after they lost consciousness and before they regained it and they had no way of knowing the person died.

Sometimes they share this information and nobody in the family around them had yet heard it, let alone mentioned it while they were unconscious.

One last thing: If you could put into words the feeling that people who have had NDE's report it would be something like the Julian of Norwich prayer: "All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well" That's from her book, one of the earliest books in the English language that we know of, called Revelations of Divine Love. It was written during a plague that wiped out 1/3 of the population of Europe, called the Black Death.

Wrapping up: We live in so far as we know in the only culture in human history that has tried to actively suppress or adopt a skeptical attitude toward unusual or mystical experiences of all kinds. So people feel weird talking about these things and tend to keep them to themselves, except in certain pockets of the population—though that's changing. When we don't talk about our experiences, we have fewer of them. (Therapy/dreams) The things we don't focus on for whatever reason, don't register with us. Plus, the Protestant Reformation, for the first time in Christian history developed an allergy to spiritual experiences and then virtually outlawed a whole set of them: anything viewed as contact with the dead (things like getting a message in a dream from a lost loved one), or having a bird or hawk show up as a sign of a lost love or conveying a message, feeling connected to all living things—a whole set of spiritual experiences prohibited. That's lifting, but it still affects us.

But we are all in a time of Big Transition, moving out of quarantine into a new normal may be as big a transition as going into quarantine. Not to mention all the personal transitions that have intensified because of Covid.

In such a time as this, fear is pretty easy to access. So maybe it's a time to increase our stores of trust. Maybe you resonate with my little book report and you wanna check it out, *After*, by Bruce Greyson. Maybe Increasing a faith practice like meditation that promote relaxation, a physical form of trust. Gratitude practices increase our stores of trust. I was meeting with Emily last week doing some church planning and a couple of times Emily said, "You know I have a lot of hope for the future for our church." Hearing that, I could feel my trust stores expand a little. So nurturing hope, expressing hope when it comes, can increase our trust stores. Naming our fears with others and expressing our hopes with others, that's a healthy combo—named fears tend to lose their edge and expressed hope increases hope, and both of those increase our trust stores. Or something else may be shown to you, that paying attention to will increase trust.

It's like we're the synagogue ruler in the crowd of distressed people, worried about whatever we're worried about, and the Divine Spirit, has a quiet message, just for us, echoing what Jesus said to the synagogue ruler: "Don't be afraid. Only trust."

Relaxation is a physical form of trust. To me, trust feels like relaxation. Diane is going to lead us in a guided meditation to give us a taste of that trust feeling.