transformation formations

I have mentioned "transformation" throughout this book without fully exploring what it means. By example and by assumption, I have tried to convey what it means in the context of a story. This chapter explores it in a bit more depth.

Transformation is change on steroids. Whereas changes can be small, transformations tend to be big. We change our socks but we are not transformed when we do so. It is the transformation of characters in a dramatic work that gives the audience a chance to transform as well. Character transformations also help create depth and universality.

How do people change? And more specifically, how do characters in stories change in ways that work for the listener?

The catch-all definition I use for transformation is "slaying internal dragons through attitude adjustment." The adjustment is necessary because of "the hero's flaw." The flaw identifies a hero's imperfection and how s/he needs to transform to address it. The flaw also tends to define the nature of the challenges that s/he will face during the course of the story. While this definition works in a general sense, let's get specific. Let's look at a few ways of understanding transformation so that you have more control of what you can do with your story.

The Eight Levels of Transformation. In my reading, listening and viewing of stories, I find eight basic levels of transformation. Characters can transform at as many of these levels as make sense. The levels are not mutually exclusive by any means, therefore characters often transform at more than one level at the same time.

The Eight Levels of Story Character Transformation

Level	Kind	Explanation
1	Physical/kines-thetic	Character develops strength or dexterity. Popeye eats spinach and grows muscles; 'Baby' (Jennifer Grey in **Dirty Dancing**) learns how to dance and wins the contest.
2	Inner strength	Character develops courage, overcomes fear, at great risk to themselves. Lucilla and Proximo (Connie Neilson and Oliver Reed in **Gladiator**) help Maximus (Russell Crowe) in his effort to restore the republic of Rome.
3	Emotional	Character matures, thinks beyond his or her own needs; Hans Solo returns to fight the good fight in **Star Wars**.
4	Moral	Character develops a conscience; Schindler develops his list
5	Psychological	Character develops insight, self-awareness. Neo (Keannu Reeves in **Matrix**) understands who he is in relation to the Matrix.
6	Social	Character accepts new responsibility with respect to family, community or a group; Max (Mel Gibson in **Road Warrior**) sticks around and helps the small oil refinery community defend itself against terrorist bike gangs.

Level	Kind	Explanation
7	Intellectual/creative	Character advances intellectual/creative ability to learn or do something new, allows him/her to solve a problem, puzzle or mystery (Neo in the **Matrix**). This level captures the essence of making students heros of their own learning stories.
8	Spiritual	Character has an awakening, which changes his or her entire perspective. With the help of a lama, Larry Darrell (Bill Murray in **Razor's Edge**) achieves a kind of enlightenment that alters his perspective of what is important about life.

How did William transform in my story? Physically/intellecutally he learned some new keystrokes. But he also gained courage and maturity in order to accept advice from a little girl in order to solve his problem. Ultimately, he changed a number of attitudes about society, particularly with respect to how teaching and learning happens. Mull over these levels of transformation. Think about the stories that you find powerful, and ask yourself how their main characters transformed.

Consider B Action movies for a moment and why they tend not to stick with you. While they usually contain a lot of conflict and resolution in the form of endless fighting, there is very little internal conflict; very few inner dragons are slain. The good guys tend to be good, the bad guys tend to bad, and no one transforms. Just a lot of fighting. Boring. And what does boring really boil down to? Unmemorable.

Bloom's Cognitive Taxonomy and Levels of Transformation. If you have spent any time in education you have undoubtedly heard of Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive processes. Although it was developed as a way to classify how we learn, it works just as well as a system for classifying how we change. Essentially what Bloom has developed is a hierarchy of transformation. As with the last hierarchy we looked at, transformation usually happens on more than one level at a time. But any one of the levels by itself could be used to cause a transformation of some kind.

Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognitive "Transformation"		
Level	Kind	Explanation
1	Knowledge	Character knows, remembers or describes something
2	Comprehension	Character explains, interprets, predicts something
3	Application	Character discovers, constructs or changes something; applies understanding to a new situation
4	Analysis	Character deconstructs a situation, distinguishes among options, plans or organizes something, compares and contrasts different things
5	Synthesis	Character pieces together parts to form a new understanding of a situation
6	Evaluation	Character assesses a situation, critiques and/or defends an idea, person; evaluates a situation in order to respond to it

Let's apply this hierarchy to the story I told. On the most basic level, William gained new knowledge that he applied to the situation: the little girl taught him a new set of

keystrokes that helped him out of a jam. But after synthesizing everything he learned from that day, he formed a new understanding about himself and the role of teachers and students in the Information Age. William transformed on many levels at once.

Bloom's Affective Taxonomy and Levels of Transformation. Bloom also created a taxonomy about the affective domain: the world of emotions and feelings. It appears below.

Bloom's Taxonomy of Affective "Transformation"		
Level	Kind	Explanation
1	Receiving phenomena	Character listens to others respectfully
2	Responding to phenomena	Character participates in solutions, works with a team, helps others
3	Valuing	Character demonstrates belief in a value system that manifests itself in solving problems for others and in valuing cultural and individual differences
4	Organization	Character prioritizes values, resolves conflicts, develops personalized value system; balances freedom, responsibility and accepts standards of moral behavior
5	Internalizing values	Character acts on value systems as an individual, rather than in response to group expectations; uses teamwork effectively, values others for their intrinsic merit rather than external qualities

How does William fare according to this transformation hierarchy? Not so well. He certainly didn't start out listening to the little girl respectfully (Level 1). But by the end of

the story, he was. In fact, in the end he promises to always listen to any little girl with computer advice. I don't want to give away the rest of the book, but I can tell you that as the story progresses William gradually does make his way through Bloom's Affective levels. I can also tell you that the butler didn't do it and no one dies in the end.

The locus of transformation. Remember the movie Ghandi? As the central character, Ghandi did not transform much throughout the movie. Yes, he learned new things and became stronger in his resolve. But as a viewer, the major transformation did not happen within him, it happened within me. I left the movie theater feeling different. Maybe I was not more willing to take on the world, but at least I was aware of the fact that I could if my convictions were strong enough. There was a kind of global transformation as well. Through reports of Ghandi's work, people throughout the world began to consider alternatives to violent conflict. My point here is that there are a number of places to look for transformation within a story. Here are four:

1. **Hero or central character.** We have discussed this a good deal throughout this book.

2. **Those the hero impacts.** As with Ghandi, much of the transformation occurred in those who observed him, a point the movie made very well.

3. You, as listener. As I explained above, the movie Ghandi changed me. I have never forgotten about it. As I write about it more than twenty years later, it is very present in my mind.

4. You, as author. Consider the digital story tellers I described earlier who engaged in stories of personal transformation. In the process of developing and telling their stories, they were transformed through their insight.

Using transformation to guide your story. Having an awareness of the many kinds of transformation allows you to do two very important things:

▸ see transformation in other stories that have stuck with you over the years

▸ craft the kinds of stories you want to tell so that they stick with your listeners

Transformation is key to developing stories that others will remember.