

Transforming, Like It Or Not

My husband Chris and I make frequent trips to Dairy Creme when it re-opens in April. We eat our creemees in the car, driving the long way home so that we can cruise by a flat wetlands area that floods every spring and provides a prolific breeding ground for peepers: tiny, noisy, nocturnal tree frogs. After wintering in protected places like under logs, with some of their body fluids actually freezing during their hibernation, peepers come out after the ice thaws all over the east coast of the United States. They live in marshes and hunt for small insects in low vegetation. Inhaling and exhaling from their vocal sacs, the males make quite a racket starting at sundown every night for a few weeks. I can't help interpreting their high-pitched mating cries as a plaintive "Pick Meee?! Meee?! Meee?! Meee?!"

Ever since I was a child I've always loved amphibians and I'm especially fond of frogs. While the metamorphosis of a caterpillar to a butterfly in a chrysalis is a lovely poetic model of natural alchemy, I'm personally more charmed by the life cycle of frogs and toads. A frog hatches from an egg, laid in gelatinous clutches of hundreds or thousands in fresh water, into its larval stage as a tadpole or "polliwog"—a chunky oval body with eyes, mouth, gills and tail. Tadpoles eat tiny insects and algae until they are ready to undergo their transformation from larvae to their adult form. They can be tadpoles for days, weeks or months depending on the species.

When they metamorphose, tadpoles suddenly sprout front legs with webbed toes, their bulging eyes migrate up higher on their heads, their digestive system alters to adapt to a

different diet, and their skin toughens but remains permeable to oxygen. In some species this dramatic change, called apoptosis, can occur in a mere 24 hours. (I call it “transfrogmification,” although I can’t be the first person who’s ever thought of that!) In more time, the rear legs strengthen until a transformed tadpole is ready to leave its pond as a mature, air-breathing frog who can hop around and hunt proficiently either on land or in water. Hence the term “amphibian” (for frogs, toads, salamanders and their relatives), the Latin roots of which mean “both” and “life,” or life in both environments.

Yes, in traditional terms the butterfly is aesthetically magnificent compared to the frog, a supposedly unappealing form that a witch might curse you to inhabit if you unwisely cross her. And yes, it’s certainly a poignant metaphor when the pedestrian caterpillar dutifully weaves a cocoon, succumbs to a mysterious unseen process, and hatches to take flight on delicate wings—blah blah blah. The tadpole, on the other hand, looks like a giant sperm that spontaneously mutates into a semi-aquatic wart-ball. But to me, the frog’s is a more transparent—and therefore more awkward, vulnerable and endearing—transmogrification that is no less miraculous than the butterfly’s. The difference is that while the caterpillar’s metamorphosis holds the mystique of occurring in secret, the humble tadpole’s erupts nakedly in plain view, right out there, in your face.

Human developmental transformations—often catalyzed by learning and leading—seem to occur miraculously, as well. They can be unexpected and crazy-making: one day we wake up and realize a deep shift is under way in us, whether we like it or not. To the extent we are able, it is instructive to ourselves and others to publicly accept that we’re transforming, to openly acknowledge the disorientation it is causing us, and to follow

the change where it takes us. Developmental transformations can be uncomfortable and occasionally ugly, no doubt about it. Anyone can be forgiven for preferring to go the butterfly route! But for me, the lesson from the frogs is that when we don't need to hide the least attractive stage of our evolution, there is really nothing left to hide.

Learning & Leading Pause

Continuing to Grow

- What stage are you at in your current leadership life cycle: egg, tadpole, metamorphosis, adult? How do you know this is your stage? (Are you considering the possibility that you might be a mature leader ready to become an egg – of sorts – again?)
- When is the last time you transformed from one stage to another, whether you liked it or not? What did you learn from that experience?
- What measures do you use to assess your leadership growth (professional competencies, performance evaluations, organizational benchmarks, your inner self-assessment, a combination of all the above, etc.)? Which measures serve you best?
- With whom do you share the joys and challenges of your growth? What difference – if any – does an exterior witness make?
- What growth or learning opportunity do you relish the most right now? Is there anything stopping you from going after it? If so, what can you do about that?
- As a leader, whose growth do you encourage? How does it feel to witness others' growth and transformation?