

Transformation
Romans 12:1-2
by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
First Central Congregational Church
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Note: Part of our *Inspire* series in collaboration with the Joslyn Art Museum.
This sermon inspired by [Transformation](#) by Roxanne Swentzell.

Roxanne Swentzell describes her art as being for people, particularly women, who have been hurt. She said, “People need to be reassured that things are OK.” And in particular that we “can feel a sense that there’s a mother taking care of us.”

Roxanne Swentzell, is a ceramicist from the Taos pueblo. She calls herself a “sculptor of human emotions.” She says, “I have tried to make sculpture that would help people get basic values, would help them get in touch with themselves.” She describes her art as “crossing cultural and all kinds of boundaries.”

The Joslyn Art Museum says of her, “With her sculptures Swentzell shares her culture and declares a common humanity — she invites us to ‘Come, sit down, we aren’t that different, let me tell you something about us.’”

And so today we sit beside this photographic image of Roxanne Swentzell’s sculpture entitled *Transformation*. What can we learn about us? How can we get in touch with ourselves through these ceramics? Will we be reassured that we are being taken care of? Will we be inspired to goodness?

I’m delighted to conclude this worship series, inspired by art from our local museum, with this piece *Transformation*. We began the series with the idea that the enjoyment of art is a spiritual practice like prayer, drawing us outside of ourselves, teaching us humility, and cultivating virtue. Along the way we have explored various points at which art connects with theology and spirituality—how we view images, particularly ourselves as images of God; the role of desire, both its dangers and its ability to transform us; and how we must cultivate the ability to see the world the way that God loves it.

Last week you had the opportunity to create art as a part of the worship experience, and I’ve heard some good things and seen such fun pictures. Thank you Katie Miller for designing that worship for us.

Two weeks ago I preached on American landscape art and its theological mistakes which contributed to the genocide of Native Americans. Today, then it is fitting, to be inspired by a Native American artist as we draw the series to a close with this focus on how art participates in our transformation.

Roxanne Swentzell grew up in Taos in a family filled with social, political, and artistic leaders. She began to make clay figures early in her life, sitting beside her mother, a noted potter. Roxanne had a speech impediment as a young girl and used her clay figures to communicate. Over her career she has become one of America's leading ceramicists. Using the traditional coil method of the Santa Clara Pueblo, she builds large clay figures expressing deep emotion and whimsy. One is amazed looking at her art to realize that this is clay pottery, as they are intricate sculptures.

The piece before us was commissioned by the Joslyn in the year 2000. They provided us with a copy of the letter Roxanne Swentzell mailed to the museum accepting the commission and describing what she intended to create.

The topic of this piece has its origins in our pueblo [sic] cultural beliefs. The title, "Transformation," helps to explain the piece. As Pueblo people we believe that we can and do, at times, transform or take on qualities of other entities such as animals, places, or spirit-beings. One such time of transformation is during our dances or ceremonies in which drums and singers sing songs of prayers to the entities of the cosmos, asking for life, but also acting as transmitters to give life. One of these such dances is our most common and well-known dance, our corn or harvest dance. This is done in celebration of the year's harvest, but at a deeper level, it is about life...the coming together of all the forces around us that create and make life possible.

This sculpture shows four young women preparing for the Corn Dance. They are in the process of getting dressed. The final one is fully dressed and is described as "having become the Corn Maiden."

Let me read one detailed description of this work. This was in materials sent by the Joslyn, though I do not know the author.

According to traditional Pueblo belief, as dance clothing is put on in preparation for a ceremonial dance—in this case the Corn Dance—there is a much deeper, unseen process taking place. Each article of clothing and each object used in the dance is symbolic of the natural and spiritual elements, such as sun, clouds, rain and earth, that come together to create and sustain life. As a dancer fastens and ties the clothing, she absorbs and gathers the powerful forces they represent. Her individual identity falls away and she becomes the Corn Maiden. She becomes part of the greater whole, transformed into the spiritual being that brings harvest to the people. With every breath the Corn Maiden entity takes into herself the forces of life, and with every exhalation she gently blesses the earth and its creatures.

Wow, I think that's rather beautiful.

It also reminds me of something. On occasion I've participated in ecumenical and interfaith worship services at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral downtown, which means I've been in the sacristy in order to put on my robes. Hanging on the wall of the sacristy is a detailed set of instructions for the Episcopal priest to follow when she or he is vesting for worship. There are

specific prayers to utter for each piece of clothing and each item they wear. The act of getting dressed for worship is itself an act of worship, transforming the priest.

For the Pueblo young women the Corn Dance is about blessing the community with what it needs to nourish itself. Sharon Naranjo-Garcia, a member of the Santa Clara Pueblo, said, “From the corn we learn to live, we learn the life that is ours. By grinding the corn we learn the footsteps of life.” Corn has spiritual connections with the longstanding traditions of the people.

In her letter to the Joslyn describing the piece, Roxanne Swentzell wrote, We live in a world of patterns and symbols. Everything has a meaning and is a part of the story of life. At the point that a dancer has gathered the different forces around and within him or her, which are symbolized by the different dance articles he or she wears, that person is no longer an individual but has transformed into a spiritual being connected to the greater whole. At this point much life force is flowing through this being in every breath and as the breath is released...the breath itself is a blessing of life going out to the places and beings who are there.

Can we be transformed into a giver of life and blessing?

In Romans 12, St. Paul instructs us to “present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.” How are we to do this? “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds.”

In our worship, we take bread and grape juice and pray over it, turning it into a symbolic and spiritual food to nourish us. According to theologian Natalie Carnes, “The Eucharist reveals to us what our bread and wine, our fruit of the land and work of human hands, truly are and are for.” Our work and what we produce are intended by God for communion—to connect us to God and one another, crossing barriers of time and space. The Lord’s Supper, as with all our worship, forms our character and shapes how we see and experience the world.

In another place Carnes writes that we become like Christ by behaving as Christ did, which means “behaving as if others are Christ.” We draw closer to Jesus by treating everyone as Jesus did, as persons with dignity.

This is one reason I’m deeply troubled this week. As I’m sure you are. A bigoted assault upon our transgender citizens. Fearful rhetoric directed at poor people fleeing violence and seeking a better life. Assassination attempts on public figures. And yesterday’s mass shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh.

Earlier this week I awoke from a dream in which I saw images of the Honduran peasants fleeing violence and heard the voice of Jesus saying, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

To be transformed into who God wants us to be means to see and love and act as Jesus did. As our religious tradition has long taught us. We must become agents of life and blessing, crossing borders and boundaries.

To be transformed by God enables us to see as God sees and love as God loves. Carnes writes, “To see the world in this way—as an image of God—requires resisting the will to master the world. It demands, instead, opening the self up to the transformations love can accomplish.”

Let's do that! Let's open ourselves and make ourselves vulnerable. Let God work in us and through us so that we become ever more like God. More glorious, more wonderful. Let us be transformed.