Keith Oatley and Maja Djikic

Emotions and Transformation

Varieties of Experience of Identity

In re-reading my manuscript, I am almost appalled at the amount of emotionality which I find in it.

— William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902, p. 486)

Introduction

The Varieties of Religious Experience is an exploration of personal narratives about religious experience, but as one might gather from the epigraph to this article, James treats religion in an eccentric way. He takes religious experience to mean something close to the emotional experience of identity. His central question is how one might discover happiness within oneself and in one’s relations with others, or if such happiness seems far distant, how one might achieve a change that will accomplish a new identity.

A hundred years after James’s great work, religion may be a subject to which fewer people in the academy turn, but emotions, identity and self-transformation are matters of lively interest. In this article, therefore, we consider some of the autobiographical accounts that James presented, along with some of his ideas of their significance. We offer some steps towards seeing how they may contribute to a twenty-first century psychology of emotions and transformation of the self.

Emotions are, as James was appalled to find on re-reading his manuscript, at the centre of conscious religious experience. One might also remark (which James did not) that the emotions about which one reads in his book are rather different from ‘emotion’, the entity that was his best known contribution to theory in psychology. He introduced the earlier species of emotion in 1884 in an article entitled, ‘What is an emotion?’ (James, 1884).

James’s 1884 theory of emotion, with its refinements in his famous textbook, The Principles of Psychology (1890), had the effect for which any theorist longs. It became the principal object in the field for many years. Even those who grumbled had to start from it, and argue against it.

James’s theory was that people’s everyday ideas about emotions were wrong:

Common sense says, we lose our fortune, are sorry and weep; we meet a bear, are frightened and run; we are insulted by a rival, are angry and strike. The hypothesis here to be defended says that this order of sequence is incorrect... that we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble (James, 1890, pp. 449–50).

An emotion is the perception of bodily changes, of weeping, of running, and so forth. James said (emphasizing his proposal by italics) that: 'the bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion' (James, 1890, p. 449). According to this idea, an emotion is a perception, an outcome, not a mental cause. Common sense is wrong in thinking that the emotion can instigate anything. The motivational cause is the 'exciting fact'.

Was James appalled, when he re-read his manuscript of The Varieties of Religious Experience, not just because there was so much emotionality, but because the 'common sense' theory of emotions had reasserted itself? Everything in his book on religion is about the motivating properties of emotions. We read about the happiness that enables us to love others and not be overwhelmed by evil in the world. We read about the fear of evil in ourselves that motivates us to seek self-transformation.

Consider this statement, from James's 1890 textbook, of a thought experiment that he found telling:

*If we fancy some strong emotion, and try to abstract from our consciousness of it all the feelings of its bodily symptoms, we find we have nothing left behind, no ‘mind-stuff’ out of which the emotion can be constituted, and that a cold and neutral state of intellectual perception is all that remains* (James, 1890, p. 451, italics in original).

In the book on religion, there is a parallel thought experiment. It shows the vigorous shoots of a kind of theorizing sharply at variance with his earlier writing.

Conceive yourself, if possible, suddenly stripped of all the emotion with which your world now inspires you, and try to imagine it as it exists, purely by itself, without your favorable or unfavorable, hopeful or apprehensive comment... No one portion of the universe would then have importance beyond another, and the whole collection of its things and series of its events would be without significance, character, expression, or perspective. The passion of love is the most familiar and extreme example of this fact. If it comes, it comes: if it does not come, no process of reasoning can force it. Yet it transforms the value of the creature loved... (James, 1902, p. 150, italics in original).

By 1902, we may be almost appalled to read that emotions have acquired such important functions. Now they have attentional and motivational properties. Now love makes salient, and gives significance to, our relationship with some particular person. We hear no more about 'the exciting fact'. Love transforms the value of a particular person.

James here begins to explore the idea that would be articulated fully by Tomkins (1970) many decades later, that emotions are the primary mechanisms whereby attention is concentrated. They are the means by which motivational
priority is conferred on one set of actions rather than another. It would have been gratifying to James to know that the process that — as Tomkins put it — amplifies the motivation and thus gives it priority, is the perception of bodily processes (feelings) proposed by James. But for James it is almost as if, in the book on religious experience, a new ‘mind stuff’ of the consciousness of emotions has emerged and has demanded his attention. We could find only one passage in James’s 1902 book that stressed bodily symptoms (a correspondent said conversion involves resisting ‘physical manifestations, such as quickened pulse’, and then letting them have ‘their full sway’ (James, 1902, p. 251)). Saving this instance, it is the conscious mind stuff of emotions that is momentous, and has compelling motivational effects. Nor are emotions considered in relation to minor matters. They are the instigators of the grandest personal projects: transformations of selfhood to become happier and better people.

**Emotions and Transformation**

Emotions now are widely recognized as among the principals in the drama of psychology. A clear and widely accepted account is that of Frijda (1986) who argued that emotions are states of readiness that prompt us in one direction rather than another. Emotions function by giving priority to particular concerns, or goals, just as, in 1902, James had pointed out that love gives significance to some particular person, and that an emotional experience of religious conversion gives substance to a new life. A modern statement of how emotions work is that they give priority to actions that advance goals (Frijda calls this goal precedence). In an older terminology, they advance what is evaluated as good, and they prompt us to combat or avoid what is evaluated as bad.

Among the issues that James made salient in his book on religious experience, and that remain psychologically important today, is this. In (let us call it) the more basic kind of developmental psychology, sociology or anthropology, we learn how people develop from genetic roots, and grow up in an ecosystem of family, school and society. In the stronger versions of such accounts, people become distillations of their community. They come to embody its concepts and enact its precepts.

With this kind of theory of development, it would scarcely be expected that many adults should turn round on their own selfhood, and see that their identity was not as they would have wished. According to this kind of theory, it is odd that biographers of adult life cycles such as Gail Sheehy (1976) should regularly discover promptings towards adult revolutions of identity. The surprise of such discoveries is only surpassed by the surprise at the emotional quality of the crises that occur in these transitions.

One of James’s insights in his book on religious experience, therefore, is that there are really two large phases of development. The first begins with birth, and is what might be called child development. The religion of those who accomplish it successfully is of what James calls ‘healthy mindedness’. By adulthood, although refinements might occur and wisdom will no doubt increase, identity is
largely formed. Such people are happy in themselves and, on the whole, with the
society that has produced them. Although evil things occur, to use further
Jamesian metaphors, such people need only be ‘once-born’. Their spiritual ‘ac-
counts are kept in the same denomination’ (James, 1902, p. 166). For them, the
pluses and minuses of life yield an algebraic sum, and calculations can prompt
life plans to accumulate pluses and, as far as possible, to eliminate minuses.
What James did in his book on religion, without calling it so, was to introduce
the idea of a second phase of development: the possibility of a transformation of
identity during adulthood. For some people, the evil and misery of the world is
such that the algebraic kind of moral accounting of good and evil is illusory.

Natural good is not simply insufficient in amount and transient, there lurks a falsity
in its very being. Cancelled as it all is by death if not by earlier enemies, it gives no
final balance, and can never be the thing intended for our lasting worship. It keeps us
from our real good, rather; and renunciation and despair of it are our first step in the
direction of the truth. (James, 1902, p. 166)

Such people need to be — and this is the central metaphor of James’s book —
‘twice born’. The occasion for a second birth, that James saw in 1902, was a con-
version experience. From such a basis, a second phase of the developmental tra-
jectory can begin, but on a sounder basis than that offered by the ordinarily
instilled values of ordinary society. James’s book can be thought of as the first in
the twentieth century to describe identity transitions of adulthood. It would be
followed by investigations of crises of adulthood during development through
the lifespan by such psychologists as Jung (1939), Erikson (1959) and Levinson
(1986).

James was fascinated by conversion experiences, when a person repudiates his
or her previous life and seeks to replace it by something new. What engenders the
second birth? It is a conscious emotional experience. People who have longed to
be second-born recognize in despair and anguish the inadequacies of a previous
self, and their emotions have the strongest possible motivational significance.

Here is James, writing about the power of conversion experiences, when the
mental structure of a person’s life dissolves, chrysalis like, to be replaced by a
new realization, and a new way of living:

What brings such changes about is the way in which emotional excitement alters.
Things hot and vital to us today are cold tomorrow. It is as if seen from the hot parts
of the field that the other parts appear to us, and from these hot parts personal desire
and volition make their sallies. They are in short the centres of our dynamic energy,
whereas the cold parts leave us indifferent and passive in proportion to their cold-
ness . . . Emotional occasions, especially violent ones, are extremely potent in pre-
cipitating mental rearrangements. The sudden and explosive ways in which love,
jealousy, guilt, fear, remorse, or anger can seize upon one are known to everybody.
Hope, happiness, security, resolve, emotions characteristic of conversion, can be
equally explosive. And emotions that come in this explosive way seldom leave
things as they found them. (James, 1902, pp. 195 and 198)

James invokes the metaphor of emotions as being ‘hot’ as compared with mere
cognition which is neutral and ‘cold’. In his earlier work, it was the ‘exciting
fact’ that motivated behaviour: the very appearance of the bear in the woods motivated running away. Emotion added a subsequent colour and warmth to the experience. That was its function. One might almost say that for humankind emotion was like colour printing and colour television: it added vividness. By 1902 however, in the autobiographical narratives of conversion that James related there was a different pattern. A person would recognize a contradiction in the former way of life, and experience the pressure of a consciously realized emotion. Then would occur tribulation, paradox and confusion, and more emotions. Finally, the sufferer would realize a new possibility, a psychological rebirth such as this by Henry Alline of Nova Scotia, written on 26 March 1775.

At that instant of time when I gave all up to him to do with me as he pleased, and was willing that God should rule over me at his pleasure, redeeming love broke into my soul with repeated scriptures, with such power that my whole soul seemed to be melted down with love; the burden of guilt and condemnation was gone, darkness was expelled, my heart humbled and filled with gratitude, and my whole soul, that was a few minutes ago groaning under mountains of death, and crying to an unknown God for help, was now filled with immortal love . . . (James, 1902, pp. 218–19)

It was this kind of writing, no doubt, that almost appalled James with its ‘amount of emotionality’. James inquired whether such an experience was merely an experience. He concluded that it was not. Great emotional intensity was important, but he judged that the metaphor of rebirth was apt. He wrote that Henry Alline ‘became a Christian minister, and thenceforward his life was fit to rank, for its austerity and single mindedness, with that of the most devoted saints’ (James, 1902, p. 220). James said that the only statistics he could find for the stability of new personality were those ‘collected for Professor Starbuck by Miss Johnson’, of self-reports of one hundred evangelical church members, more than half of whom were Methodists. Though ‘fluctuation in the ardor of sentiment’ was usual, only six reported ‘a change of faith’ (ibid., p. 258). (Starbuck had been one of James’s students, and was the author of a book, The Psychology of Religion (Starbuck, 1911), to which James made frequent reference).

Conversion, then, is an invariably emotional process, a shift from one emotional centre to another. The saintly person, argued James, is one in whom a shift has occurred of ‘the emotional centre towards loving and harmonious affections, towards “yes, yes,” and away from “no,” where the claims of the non-ego are concerned’ (James, 1902, p. 273). To make concrete this idea, James offered the figure of the mind as a polyhedron with several sides. Over the course of development the polyhedron has come to rest on one of its surfaces. If it is displaced a bit, habit and predisposition cause it to fall back onto that surface. Conversion is the process of this polyhedron being levered up so that it topples onto a different surface. In the language of dynamic systems theory (see Lewis and Granic, 2000) we would say of a person who is converted that his or her life, having previously been based on the attractors of selfish emotions of one kind or another, becomes based on the attractor of love of God, or love of others.

To our minds, alongside his inauguration of the study of what is now called life-span development, the most original and far-reaching idea of James’s 1902
book is that of the functions of emotions. Not only are emotions central to human motivation and personality, but changes of life from one emotional centre to another are themselves fundamentally, and consciously, emotional. Here, for instance, is another of James’s examples, of David Brainerd, who wrote that he had tried to pray as well as he could, but:

... all my contrivances and projects to effect or procure deliverance and salvation for myself were utterly in vain ... for I saw that self-interest had led me to pray, and that I had never once prayed from any respect for the glory of God ... I never once truly intended it, but only my own happiness. (James, 1902, pp. 212–13)

The more Brainerd tried to pray for the glory of God, the more he realized that behind his efforts was the selfish motive of his own salvation. In this state he continued to try to pray, but he was ‘disconsolate, as if ... nothing in heaven or earth could make me happy’. As with many of James’s examples, it was as if an external agency supervened, which Christians call grace, to lever him over onto a new emotional centre. On 12 July 1739, Brainerd’s insoluble problem transformed:

... as I was walking in a thick grove, unspeakable glory seemed to open to the apprehension of my soul. I do not mean any external brightness, or any imagination of a body of light, but it was a new inward apprehension or view that I had of God, such as I never had before, not anything which had the least resemblance to it ... My soul rejoiced with joy unspeakable, to see such a God, such a glorious Divine Being; and I was inwardly pleased and satisfied that he should be God over all for ever and ever ... I had no thought about my own salvation, and scarce reflected that there was such a creature as myself. (James, 1902, pp. 213–14)

In narrative terms we would say that the plot of life is not its setting, its circumstances and its events. It is the trajectory and succession of emotional centres that enable first this constellation of aspirations, goals and actions to be salient, and then — if a transformation should occur — another set. A few years after his book on religious experience, James wrote a paper, ‘The energies of men’ (1907), in which he took this idea further. He argued that people habitually use only a small part of their potential powers. What makes the difference between the normal and the exceptional person? James answers: ‘Either some unusual stimulus fills them with emotional excitement, or some unusual idea of necessity induces them to make an extra effort of will. Excitements, ideas, and efforts, in a word, are what carry us over the dam.’ (James, 1907, p. 222)

**Modern Times**

Let us time-travel from 1902 to the present, across a century that saw far-reaching transformations of life, appalling atrocities in the name of systems of state religion or equivalent beliefs, as well as a slow inching forward towards normalization of affection and respect in everyday emotional relationships.

Despite still-widespread religious expressions, modern lives in the West are in many ways more secular than those James considered. We might, therefore, note that whereas religious conversion was the paradigm case for James, in modern times transformations of character occur in a variety of ways. In the second part
of this article, therefore, we widen the scope of James’s original enquiry to secular examples, while we maintain his focus on transformation and its relation to emotions.

First we consider some of the tribulations of the self in the modern world, then three categories of transformation.

1. Selfhood

The chapter of James’s book entitled ‘The Value of Saintliness’, in which he discusses saintly values — purity, patience, charity — seems oddly anachronistic. Unless we are professionally employed to deal with ethical issues, most of us do not fret in judging values. Certainly we have values. They are implicit in what we do. Yet usually we do not make them explicit to ourselves or others. Most people think they know what they want, and are driven by the implicit conviction that attaining their goals will result in happiness. (See also Charles Taylor’s book *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Taylor, 2002).)

This reflection suggests a questioning, from a twenty-first century perspective, of James’s belief that values need evaluation if they are to lead to happiness. A second questioning is whether we moderns are ‘conflicted’ at heart. If we look around us, there are indeed conflicts, but they tend to be not so much existential as local: perhaps work, perhaps a lover, perhaps a death in the family. It is not obvious that for us moderns, selfhood is still (as James put it) a ‘battle-ground’ for ‘two deadly hostile selves, one actual, the other ideal’, or between selves carnal and selves spiritual. Nor is it obvious that we human beings are necessarily vulnerable to ‘wrong living, impotent aspirations’ (James, 1902, p. 171). How has such a change occurred in a mere century? Have our parents and grandparents somehow managed to solve the eternal conflict of a dual nature, so that we, their children, now bask in its solution?

James describes sanguine ‘once-born’ individuals who turn a blind eye to maintain happiness. Today the eye of the television camera is everywhere: everyday we see images of death and suffering. So it has become not so much a matter of turning a blind eye to a blind heart. While in the past, those in fortunate circumstances could have lived a lifetime without prolonged contact with misery or evil (or, as James notes, could have avoided it as they would a disease (James, 1902, p.114)), this is no longer possible. Although evil is certainly not peculiar to the last century, wars, genocides, human rights abuses of appalling kinds have occurred abundantly in those years. We look round the world and see poverty and misery everywhere, from our local high street to the shanties of the Third World. We in the West are tempted to turn down the volume of our emotional reception, for, to quote an acquaintance: ‘What is the point of being miserable because you’ve taken on your shoulders all the misery of the world? That will not help others, and will certainly not help yourself.’

So does the reduced volume of empathetic anguish make us healthier and happier? There are immediate benefits of muffling emotions to avoid misery and evil, with an added value of not resembling what James called ‘A “degenere
superieur"... who finds more difficulty than is common in keeping his spiritual house in order and running his furrow straight, because his feeling and impulses are too keen and too discrepant mutually” (James, 1902, p. 169). James knew that:

... creatures of exalted emotional sensibility [have]... often led a discordant inner life, and had melancholy during a part of their career. They have known no measure, been liable to obsessions and fixed ideas; and frequently they have fallen into trances, heard voices, seen visions, and presented all sort of peculiarities which are ordinarily classed as pathological. (James, 1902, pp. 6–7)

Pathological, we call them, those sufferings of emotional disorder. The sheer expression ‘emotional disorder’ implies that there is something wrong with the way such people experience emotions. To the extent that individuals experience emotions in response to extreme real life events, however, their vulnerability to anxiety and depression seems not disordered but the reverse. Yet as soon as prolonged acute negative emotions are experienced that are not directly traceable to some negative life event, mental health practitioners would urge them towards health — happiness — by way of pharmacology or psychotherapy. Is it symptomatic of our times of atrocity and trauma, where no one is inoculated against evil happening to them, that maintaining a blind heart may be functional? It seems to reduce vulnerability. It is the mark of resilience. Of what James called healthy mindedness. This seeming resilience may, however, be a fragile bridge of emotional appeasement. If it collapses, it can tear down the interwoven structure of selfhood at its foundation. James argued that it was only such a collapse that would offer hope for the building of the twice-born self.

To say, then, that the negative emotions of distress and empathetic suffering are dysfunctional would be misleading. Perhaps such emotions are as functional in human life as our evident fascination for other people and their lives. Though muffling emotions might make us less prone to fear and anxiety, perhaps this muffling might make us simultaneously less able to manage our important interpersonal and intrapersonal goals and values. In James’s cases of conversion, the emotional upheaval of a second birth involved an expression that contradicted, or even surpassed, both self-preserving and societal standards. We see a glimpse of the possibility that the integrative tendencies of consciousness — including considerations of society and justice — might, at least for a few, come to predominate over the piecemeal and impulsive tendencies of a once-born nature.

Even without such an integrative and altruistic sense, the comforts of once-born happiness may fail to satisfy, as Dostoevsky describes:

Shower upon him every earthly blessing, drown him in a sea of happiness, so that nothing but bubbles of bliss can be seen on the surface; give him economic prosperity, such that he should have nothing else to do but sleep, eat cakes and busy himself with the continuation of his species, and even then out of sheer ingratitude, sheer spite, man would play you some nasty trick. He would even risk his cakes and would deliberately desire the most fatal rubbish, the most uneconomical absurdity, simply to introduce into all this positive good sense his fatal fantastic element. (Dostoevsky, 1965, p. 75, italics ours.)
The desire of the kind Dostoevsky describes is difficult to explain since it is not obvious what the emotional fuel for such non-productive contrariness might be. The existence of such self-contradicting desires in humankind has incited many thinkers to postulate instincts in addition to a self-preservation one. In ‘Beyond the pleasure principle’, for instance, Freud (1920) introduced the ‘death instinct’, which was opposed to Eros, the primary sexual and creative drive, as a want to restore living human beings to the state from which they came: nothingness. It seems that Dostoevsky intuited the paradox of humankind satisfied in their self-preserving wants and yet still restlessly searching for . . . something. Perhaps the creative instincts of humankind need to be fulfilled in a meaningful manner. Unexplored generative potentialities have a cruel tendency to torment their possessors until a Jamesian second birth releases them into actuality.

We might reflect that Dostoevsky, James and Freud were all from another age. We might find their formulations quaint. What has happened, we moderns might say, is that by the year 2002 we either have achieved, or have the means to achieve, the material paradise that our nineteenth-century forbears worked for. The ‘earthly blessing’ of which Dostoevsky wrote did not exist in his time; he could only imagine its properties. Now it does exist, and — so the argument goes — if it does not exist for everyone that is because of economics, not the perversity of human desire.

Has human contradictoriness dissolved in this modern age? Or if not, how should we see it? In two ways perhaps.

One way was described by Martha Nussbaum. In her book *The Therapy of Desire* (1994) she discusses in turn the Aristotelian, the Epicurean and the Stoic, visions of the good. Epicurus, born around 342 BCE, argued that the things that most people cared for then — money, fame, power, sex, immortality — were of no real value. When we look honestly at ourselves and our friends, more than 2000 years later, writes Nussbaum, we see that not much has changed.

Do we see calm rational people, whose beliefs about value are for the most part well based and sound? No. We see people rushing frenetically about after money, after fame, after gastronomic luxuries, after passionate love, people convinced by the culture itself, by the stories on which they are brought up . . . a sick society, a society that values money and luxury above the health of the soul. (Nussbaum, 1994, p. 103)

We may not experience ourselves as the battlegrounds between actual and ideal selves, and earthly paradise has offered sufficiency, but because of the insistent goals of today, what tends to be perceived is not sufficiency but limitless abundance. What this paradise has promoted is not the benefits of generosity of the soul that might have been imagined with delivery from material privation, it has promoted greed. Reflective thinkers — and that is what Epicurus and Nussbaum would like us to be — see contradictions in the very fact of self-preservation and the current repertoire of human emotions in relation to the wide availability of material goods and the large variety of freer relationships. Perhaps we have not come very far in the last hundred years.

The second way might be called political. It was emphasized for the West on 11 September 2001, when two jetliners were flown at the twin towers of the
so-called World Trade Center, and destroyed them. A small number of people
left poor, made angry and disgusted by Western profligacy and disdain, were
able to turn Western technology against itself. Not because of human economics,
but because of human politics is the abundance of the Western world denied to
all. Its very existence depends on appropriation. The unjust death of innocents in
North America should perhaps start being treated as a spreading symptom of the
disease that has at its root lack of respect for human rights to live, and to live well,
not just in the West but elsewhere. Only in these terms can we start treating the
core problem of human rights. Otherwise we might spend our energy either iso-
lating our material gains from the rest of the world, or trying to multiply our own
economic well-being at the expense of the rest of the world.

Notice that both these forms of contradicitoriness are powered by emotions and
for both, their understanding is an emotional understanding. So, although super-
ficially the terms have changed, the situation is in some ways not very different,
we think, than James studied in those who lived in travail because their souls
were sick, or than Dostoevsky foresaw. Is the difference that we moderns,
pleased with our material comforts, have became less rather than more willing to
acknowledge and learn from the anguish and pain of others?

Societies have transmitted collective knowledge of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ for mil-
ennia, to enable individuals to become more fully actualized and unified within
themselves, to enable them to contribute, still, to society during times of turmoil
and catastrophe. Yet at the same time societies will resist (and even vilify) heroes
attempting to change them, just as individuals will resist any painful trans-
cendence of the established self. During crises, a minority of heroes may sow seeds
that transform their societies. When Campbell (1949) wrote about the heroic
path, and the way in which it has been represented in the mythologies of the
world, he wrote of the hero ‘in each of us’. Just as in our towns and cities we
value monuments that allow us to orient ourselves, so in our cultural lives some
few individuals are cultural monuments — James called them saints — who
allow us to orient ourselves. Their very being illustrates the possibilities of cou-
rage of spiritual generosity, rather than narrow concerns of the ego-self. Unlike
saints who are saintly all the time, most of us will be fortunate to be illuminated
with even a few moments that lead to more fulfilled lives for all.

James saw heroism illustrated in war, where willingness to subject oneself to
extreme discomfort, and to risk one’s life, even becomes appealing. He gives the
example of a soldier:

His dread of cowardice impelling him to advance, his fears impelling him to run,
and his propensities to imitation pushing him towards various courses if his com-
rades offer various examples . . . There is a pitch of intensity, though, which, if any
emotion reach it, enthrones that one as alone effective and sweeps its antagonists
and all their inhibitions away. (James, 1902, p. 263)

Drawing on thoughts of this kind, James wondered about ‘the moral equivalent
of war: something heroic that will speak to men as universally as war does, and
yet will be as compatible with their spiritual selves as war has proved itself to be
incompatible’ (James, 1902, p. 367). It is interesting that he suggests the ‘old
monkish poverty-worship’ as a moral equivalent to war that provided hope for salvation: interesting because it is counter-intuitive. Poverty can speak to men as universally as war only if it is self-imposed from the position of wealth. Another, perhaps more realistic, hope, lies in the transformative power of emotional experience: in admitting to dissatisfaction when our merely material needs are met. Such a hope needs, also, the flexibility to let go of a former once-born self in the search for creative and non-egotistic ways of interacting with the world.

From an evolutionary perspective, we might reflect that if every individual in every society were to reach her or his potential in this kind of way, this result might be as beneficial to them and their societies as if every sheep in a herd decided to leave and find its own way. Yet we humans seem to be very rebellious sheep, and we are emotional about our rebelliousness as well. Shepherds no doubt think quite properly about the market; the sheep may have in mind pastures other than the most profitable. Perhaps our urge to separate ourselves from aims that are merely self-preserving and material offers hope. Might this be the emotional lever that would allow perhaps a monumental few, or perhaps in smaller ways the many, to tip over the polyhedron of selfhood onto a different surface?

2. Varieties of transformation

Let us now consider three kinds of transformation, appropriate to modern times. As with James’s examples, these transformations occur during adulthood. What we hope is that by widening the range of experiences to be discussed we can understand more about the hinges about which lives can turn, discover common patterns, and see further into the question of what roles emotions play in changes that occur.

i. Personal transformation

The first kind of transformation is the kind for which James provided paradigm examples: the personal conversion experience and its relation to the divine. It is significant because it seems to arise not from an event or a relationship but from inner sources that include conscious self-reflection. Such cases do indeed continue into the twentieth century, and no doubt into the twenty-first, as for instance with this from a thirty-five-year-old woman:

The first moments were blessedly quiet, and private, far less boring than she would have thought. In fact, she felt an upheaval. All that had happened, but that had not been felt, was felt. It was the beginning of a fertile upheaval. Her thought did not have to be restricted, her feelings edited. Than a command of Christ’s called her out of herself: Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you. (Sheehy, 1982, p. 362)

Experiences of this kind, including those of caring external agencies, are not just anachronisms. See, in addition, the case discussed by Ferrari, in this special issue, of Ed Fine, who escaped from a high floor in the World Trade Center after it had been attacked.
James included a few secular cases, including that of one John Foster, who converted from being a profligate wastrel who lost his fortune into a very devoted miser (James, 1902, pp. 178–9). In the twentieth century, however, the emphasis may have become more predominantly secular.

A more edifying secular example than that of John Foster, is that of Joanna Field who had been an undergraduate student of psychology at Bedford College at the University of London, England, in the 1920s, and then worked as an industrial psychologist. With her training she conceived the idea of gathering facts about her life, like an experiment, by keeping a diary to see what events and activities made her happy. She wrote about this project in her 1934 book *A Life of One’s Own*. She had expected that within a few weeks or months she would be able to say, ‘these are the facts of my life, now I’m going to do something about it’ (Field, 1934, p. 36). ‘If it should turn out that happiness did not matter,’ she wrote, ‘I should have a chance of finding out what was more important’ (*ibid.*, p. 28).

Her early results horrified her. She discovered that one morning her main concern had been whether she would be able to get her hair cut before going to work, and that the rest of the day, which included concerns about people’s reactions to her haircut, was equally banal. The project became more rather than less perplexing. It lasted for several years and in the end produced a change in her career. She found that, to start with, her life was a planless mixture:

I had thought I wanted a great many friends, but had often refused invitations because I hated to feel the beautiful free space of an empty day . . . broken into by social obligations. I had thought I wanted to be a unique individual, but had been filled with shame when someone disagreed with me . . . I had thought I wanted to be importantly useful in the world, but avoided all opportunities for responsibility. (Field, 1934, p. 85)

Field’s major discovery was that much of her life was determined by what she came to call ‘blind thoughts’, anxieties that were completely self absorbed, that proceeded in directions of their own and left trails of worries, upsets and bad moods. Field likened these to childish thoughts, stuck at an early and egocentric stage of Piagetian development. Because they had previously been at the edge of consciousness she had not recognized them as the instigators of her moods. She found that for every act based on deliberation there were dozens that grew out of this self-absorbed reverie. This anxious inner mind, she discovered, was not only irrational and immune from external considerations, it was a mean mind. It set itself all sorts of impossible standards, and when these were not achieved it reviled her. It was based on pervasive social fears and anxieties.

Her escape — her secular conversion — was a discovery within herself of a more secure intuitive basis for living. In a passage that shares affinities with accounts of religious conversions, she writes:

In the end the knowledge of my deliverance came suddenly . . . the idea occurred to me that until you have, once at least, faced everything that you know — the whole universe — with utter giving in, and let all that is ‘not you’ flow over and engulf you, there can be no lasting sense of security. (Field, 1934, pp. 192–3)
She reached what she called a kind of inner wisdom, so that her fears of being taken over by others, or disliked or losing her self, began to diminish:

I realized now that as long as you feel insecure you have no real capacity to face other men and women in that skill of communication which more than any other skill requires freedom from tension... I was now finding that I chiefly reckoned each day's catch of happiness in terms of my relationships with others. (Field, 1934, p. 193)

Although the scene has changed from the religious to the secular, the emotional structure of second birth remains strikingly similar to the one that James proposed in his cases of positive conversion. An inner movement occurs, via a state of revelation, which is almost like the intervention of an outside agency — James's lever tipping the polyhedron of the mind onto another surface — to a new state with a largely different emotional tone and promptings.

More formally, psychotherapy has become the occasion for many to make positive changes in their life paths. Here, for instance, from Scheff (1979) is an extract from the story of a man in his forties who had separated from his wife and children after a marriage that had lasted many years. He started seeing a psychiatrist once a week but remained tense and lonely, and then started attending a psychotherapy group. In the group:

... he had told the story of his life to a fellow participant. He had also stood up before the class and repeated phrases provided by the leader, 'I hurt,' and 'I hurt a little bit'... [he] felt a lump in the throat, but no other feelings... In the evening he went to the home of a friend. He told her about the group he had attended. When repeating the phrases he had spoken in front of the class, he began crying. At the first the crying was very tense and somewhat painful... After some fifteen or twenty minutes, the crying became more relaxed...[later he] began to shake and sweat. The shaking was violent, like an earthquake, yet he felt no fear... After another brief rest [he] began to feel angry...[later]. Once again he rested. Because of what happened before, he anticipated further strong emotional responses. After a few minutes, he felt a strong sensation again, this time the urge to laugh. He laughed a deep, relaxed laugh... (Scheff, 1979, pp. 14–15)

After these experiences he, 'experienced himself as having changed in fundamental ways. He felt more relaxed and open, and less driven' (Scheff, 1979, p. 16). Although previously obsessed with work, he gained more perspective and was more creative, as well as feeling less frustration and more openness with people.

In the twentieth century, psychotherapy, both professional and informal, has taken over some of the functions of religion, as the foregoing shows. In the terms that we have been considering, the patron saint of transformation during adulthood has perhaps been Erik Erikson (e.g. 1959). He proposed that emotional development has only undergone its initial stages at the time when traditionally one is supposed to have come of age and left home. According to Erikson, emotional tasks remain to be faced that involve the involuntary revisiting of inner conflicts left unresolved in earlier stages. In addition, there are new challenges distinctive to adulthood: conflicts between intimacy and isolation, between
generativity and self-absorption. Such issues are potent for many in precipitating, in their reflections on their lives, longings for a second birth.

So came into general consciousness the idea of the mid-life crisis. One of the best known studies of the phenomenon was by Gail Sheehy, who interviewed one hundred and fifteen individuals and couples from what she called, ‘America’s “pacesetter group” — healthy, motivated people who either began in or have entered the middle class’ (Sheehy, 1976, p. 23). In her book, Passages, she tells life stories of their progressions and transformations to new states. These stories are of men and women who came to find that although in their twenties they had accomplished what was expected of them, their life had not turned out as they expected. In their thirties or forties such people found themselves dissatisfied, empty or restless.

The 1960s in America saw not only the increasing availability of psychotherapy, but the dawning of sexual liberation and the (not unrelated) growth of the human potential movement, with its widening social circles and encounter groups — times of high emotional excitement that gave many occasions for second births — that enabled people to undertake substantial changes in their lives.

ii. Social relationships

A second kind of transformation is that which occurs because of a new relationship, for instance by falling in love. James used sexual love as an example at several places in his book, but only in passing.

Experiences of this kind are intermediate between those that are self-instigated and those caused by external agencies. In the West, indeed, it is to emphasize a certain absence of wilful agency that we speak of falling in love. Here is an example from a woman of such an event that occurred when she was about nineteen, a worker in a cigarette factory in Bristol, England, during the 1930s.

We went steady for some time before anything like sex was even mentioned. Then one summer evening we were strolling through some fields and decided to sit down. We kissed passionately and spoke of our love for each other. After a while he undid the fastenings of my blouse, slipped his hand inside and began to fondle my breast, whilst his other hand entered my lower undergarments and he proceeded to fondle my private parts. This continued for a while — still kissing passionately — when I realized he was much aroused. So, too, was I and he rolled over onto me. It was my first experience of sex although he withdrew just before the climax. I found I quite enjoyed it, and from that time on it happened many times between us . . . I can’t really say which of us was the keenest. I think we were equal. (Humphries, 1988, pp. 26–8)

Here is a more recent instance, from an American woman:

When I first saw him I felt a lurch, a leap, and then a kind of internal sigh. An ‘At last. Where have you been for so long?’ A deep sense of recognition and a ‘relaxed excitement.’ It also felt scary as hell. (Hite, 1976, p. 490)

Both these instances seem time-and-date stamped. In the earlier one, the woman seems so surprised to hear herself talking about that (for the English)
Fifty years later, in 1995, it was the families of more than 7,000 murdered citizens of Srebenica (Bosnia and Herzegovina) who were asking not only ‘Why?’ but also ‘Who?’ and ‘Where?’

We don’t trust the ICRC [Red Cross]. They come here with a piece of paper which says such-and-such a person is dead. But who gave them that information? It’s the same people who destroyed our homes and villages and killed our husbands. And where is the evidence? Where is the body? They don’t even have an ID card or a piece of clothing. It is unacceptable. We want proof. If my husband is dead, I want to know where his body is. And if he is alive, I want to know where he is being held.

(Rejha, refugee from Srebrenica (Stover and Peress, 1998, p. 258))

The difficulty of mourning the death of a loved one in times of peace is amplified by circumstances (lack of a body, an early and meaningless end, an unpunished crime) that make it difficult even to start, let alone to complete mourning. Even bare survival seems contaminated and sinister.

My other two sons and six grandsons disappeared somewhere on the trail to Tuzla... They should have killed me, not the young boys. Look at me. I’m old and of no use to anyone. (Meho, refugee from Srebrenica (ibid., p. 272))

Young people who are left behind remain prisoners of fear, anger, guilt and shame.

My daughter was taken off by Serb soldiers at Potocari... Afterwards she became very depressed and refused to talk about it. The younger ones, they ask about their father nearly every day. Our boy even talks to Ismet’s picture. But not our oldest. She only wants to forget. (Rejha, refugee from Srebrenica (ibid., p. 278))

Every night I drank. I was having nightmares and couldn’t sleep. But, mostly, I guess, I was angry. I felt guilty because I had made it out of the woods and my father and brother hadn’t... I still dream about my father a lot. It’s the same nightmare over and over. I see him, but he can’t see me... I know now that I can never go back and live with the Serbs... If war starts again, I will look for revenge, maybe not on all Serbs, but definitely for those who killed my father and my brother. There are a lot of boys like me, a lot of them, who would like to avenge the deaths of their fathers and brothers. (Ibrahim, Refugee from Srebrenica (ibid., p. 279))

For the Srebrenica refugees the world was, and still is, the same unsafe place that inflicted meaningless anguish on them. Regaining faith in this world, in other people or even in themselves, would be nothing less than miraculous. Where fear, anger and guilt, are pervasive and intense, the emotional cues that should signal to us the change in ourselves or in our environment that need to be actively attended to, are lost in emotional turmoil. Transformations from the meaninglessness of such traumatic events into happiness and fulfillment are rare. Today, when even the North American continent is the target of large scale traumatic events, wariness and fear are palpable. While many victims of tragedies attempt to find peace in turning to stringent religious doctrines and practices, such tragedy-induced conversions are often fragile attempts to return to the blissfulness of the once-born state by seeing pain and tragedy (and the world injustice
from which it arose) as divine will. People wait for rewards for suffering in the hereafter. Facing the human tragedy in the present is too difficult.

The century that separates us from James has witnessed many traumatic events that have fuelled this kind of ruinous transformation. Events such as death of a parent, break up of a relationship and, more rarely but more conspicuously, violent events such as rape and torture, are ubiquitous across cultures and historical eras. The horrors of political brutality have a long history. But today, when the world has finally articulated humane principles (as in the United Nations Charter of Human Rights) continuing abuses seem particularly horrifying. The genocide of Jews in Nazi Germany, of Armenians in Turkey, of aboriginal peoples all around the world, the mass killings in Argentina, Chile, Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, the conflicts in Ireland and the Middle East, even 9/11, are all shorthand notations that point to a world of a certain kind. It is a world that James might not have anticipated in 1902. It is a world in which few people are neither victims nor perpetrators nor witnesses of some traumatic event. The fear, anger, guilt and despair that remain in the wake of such events immobilize people’s ability to use their emotions rather than be used by them. The states of despair that all too frequently result have the stability to which James pointed when he imagined the polyhedron of selfhood tipped onto one of its largest flat surfaces.

Conclusions

In re-reading the accounts of transformation that we have discussed in this article, we wonder whether we have tried to cover too much: experiences of religious conversion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, secular conversions, fallings in love and separations, mid-life crises, survivals of the ravages of war. Also, we lack quantitative data, just as James did. Nonetheless we think we have enough for some hypotheses.

We believe that the main hypothesis that James proposed tends to be confirmed and extended. Identity is inescapably emotional. Each of us has a centre, perhaps of anxiety, perhaps of anger, perhaps (as in James’s examples of saintliness) of love of God or humankind. The reason the centre is emotional is, as James explained (revising his earlier theory) because emotions are our principal motivators. From the hot centre of an emotion, attention is focused, some actions flow while others are stopped. Identity is realized.

In the last twenty years, psychologists have become accustomed to emotions having effects on functions such as memory and reasoning. A striking further conclusion of James’s and our project is that emotions can have effects on emotions. One emotion can transform to another. David Brainerd’s despair transformed to joy and Joanna Field’s liminal anxieties about herself transformed to enjoyment of her interactions with other people. The surfaces of what James called our mental polyhedra are emotions. The lever that tips the polyhedron from one surface to another is also emotional. Or, to use another metaphor, emotions can succeed each other as in the plot of a story. There can be a beginning in an emotion, a middle of vicissitudes and tribulations, and an end in which a new
emotional centre becomes stable. Some stories that take on heroic proportions are indeed stories of a new emotional centre being attained in a life.

By adding secular (and broader cultural) examples to James’s religious ones, we were forced to confront certain facts. The first is that, in our world, transformations may come from inner movements, but many more occur from the press of outside events. Some forces of evil seemed more vividly present during the course of the twentieth century than in James’s time. As Elder (2002) has shown, although comradeship and the responsibilities of joining the forces in the Second World War provided important new opportunities that helped many Americans, being involved in combat had a malign effect. It was damaging, in general, to the life courses of those who experienced it. The effects of war on civilians, such as those in Bosnia that we have considered here will, no doubt, also be malign.

Whereas James’s transformations were from sickness of the soul to goodness, we have included transformations from lives that were supportable to lives that became insupportable. Again we found emotions. An ancillary hypothesis is that when the polyhedron of selfhood is tipped onto a surface of despair, evil (even if one were to call it by a secular name) has effects that may not allow a subsequent shift. We have no evidence that one can necessarily recover from some of the emotional reversals that destroy our sense of trust in others and ourselves. Even the extraordinary humanity of a Primo Levi ended in a suicide.

A question arises. By the twenty-first century, how far have concerns shifted? James’s examples were of people contending with their own selfishness. Now we grapple with the effects of the material success of Western society. Perhaps its evil aspects are not as obvious to us as they might be. When we hanker after a new computer, the woman in Mexico or Malaysia who assembles it and makes it affordable to us could not herself afford such a thing. One wonders whether the evils of industrial working conditions that were combated in the nineteenth century in Europe and North America, have merely been moved abroad.

With globalization, the effects of greed on the one hand, and of resentment on the other, have taken forms that may seem more violent than ever. No doubt the increase in violence that we perceive in the twentieth century is an illusion of nearness. The effects on indigenous peoples of the arrival of the Europeans in the Americas, and the centuries of trade in slaves across the Atlantic that succeeded it, were every bit as violent as anything that has happened in the last hundred years. Those of us who are of European descent, who now live in North America, have only recently begun to reflect on the benefits we reap from appropriations of the past that continue into the present.

Although the ideas of saintliness that James discussed may, as we have suggested, have an anachronistic quality, the questions they raise persist. The question of how people born with a high proclivity towards self interest might be touched by the fates of others is more urgent than ever.

Following a first birth we become socialized. In the second births that James described people became horrified at their own or at society’s contradictions, so that a revolution could occur. Here is a modern contradiction, from the writer
James Baldwin (1963), who draws on his experience of growing up as a black person in North America:

How can one respect, let alone adopt, the values of a people [white people] who do not, on any level whatever, live the way they say they do, or the way they say they should? I cannot accept the proposition that the four-hundred-year travail of the American Negro, should result merely in his attainment of the present level of American civilization. (Baldwin, 1963, p. 103)

Shocks of realization such as that offered by Baldwin may shame us into living in a different way. If we do change, the transformation may not be as heroic or comprehensive as the second births described by William James. It may nonetheless be important. Could we think about it as a third kind of birth, the birth of recognition? Each of us is a speck in the human population. So, in this third kind of birth each modest change might be cumulated among groups of people, and sew for new generations the seeds of communities in whom the self-interested emotions are not quite as compelling as they are for us. New generations may then be able to feel more considerately towards those others on whom they so intimately depend.

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