Shifting Information Realities
With Much Love
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Shifting Information Realities

Vanakkam to my family, sisters, friends tuning in from India, Southern California, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, and more.

Welcome to my family in Jesus Christ at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. In the spirit of peace, I pay respect to the indigenous people who have lived on the land that is now called Kentucky and who continue to live here today, Shawnee, Cherokee, Chickasaw and Osage, land on which Louisville Seminary stands. In the spirit of truth, I acknowledge the African and Indigenous people whose forced labor created the foundations of the wealth of this country. In the spirit of healing, I remember the immigrants who flee poverty, prejudices, and contribute their blood, sweat, and tears to the making of these United States of America.

In the fall of 2020 reality shifting became a very popular activity on TikTok. Tik-Tok is a social media platform – think of it as Karoke for the digital age – for creating, sharing, and discovering short music videos. Harry Potter fans on TikTok, mostly younger teenagers but also some Millennials, began shifting themselves to an alternate reality, the magical world of Hogwarts. They did this using lucid dreaming, scripting, meditation, and other methods. Called shifters reality shifting, as one of them described it, is a "way of escaping the dumpster fire that 2020 and now, 2021 seem to be headed into." (Guan, 2021)

Shifter is a label that I too have claimed. No, I am not a TikTok user and I don't shift to Hogwarts ☺. Let me clue you in – my specific label is downshifter.

Downshifting is voluntarily choosing a simpler lifestyle and less material consumption in order to have greater satisfaction from non-material things like harmony, spirituality, and meaningful community engagement – in other words, it is about changing our world. Downshifting started in the late 1980s or 1990s in the advanced economies of Australia, Germany, UK, and USA. My family and I became downshifters about 15 years ago. Today, downshifters are also called minimalists: young people with the aim of promoting a reduction in material possessions and consumption in order to improve wellbeing for all humanity. They do this by making room for 'more time, more passion, more experiences, more growth, more contribution, more contentment'.

We downshifted voluntarily, but even with that, change has been a constant in my life. Academic libraries, higher education, church, publishing, non profit, and volunteering, the contexts of my teaching, research, management, and leadership experiences have all been and continue to be sites of massive change and here's my epiphany: Change and shift are synonyms for transform and one of the most familiar passages in the Bible, Romans 12:1-2 describes the nature of transformation for Christian individuals and communities.

I appeal to you, therefore, my brothers, through the mercies of God, to present your bodies a sacrifice, living, holy, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that you may ascertain what is the will of God

The first dynamic of biblical transformation is found in the sacrificial language Paul uses. This would have made a stunning impact on his ancient Israel audiences and it does me as

well: imagine putting your neck on the altar and baring it voluntarily for the axe to fall. The living body – and by body he means the totality of which we are composed - as a sacrifice metaphor is unnerving. As Richard Foster says, the problem with a living sacrifice is that it wants to get off the altar! But self-sacrificial worship that produces transformation and is our response to the Divine's love for us. Yielding our whole life to God as we live in two opposing realms – God's world and an earthly one - is daily 24/7 worship, non-conformity to the world. It is a "negative mortification" with a "positive presentation" according to John Stott. As we cease to be conformed to the values and patterns of this world, we experience the giving of our whole being to God. In this cconcrete every-day spiritual reality is a renewing of one's mind.

Secondly, Paul is also envisioning the church's new corporate identity. He radically redraws the traditional identity markers of what it means to be God's people: The people of God are transformed from being just the category of the nation state (i.e. historic Israel), from a body politic, from a community identified by ethnic and traditional boundary markers to one whose members are drawn from different nationalities and social strata and whose prosperity depends on their mutual cooperation and their working harmoniously together. I quote Dunn here: The identity of the Christian assembly as "body" however is given not by geographical location or political allegiance but by their common allegiance to Christ - this is visibly expressed not least in baptism and the sacramental sharing of his body but also in the beloved community, being transformed.

I like to think that because transformation and counter-cultural modes of being are such an integral part of Christian and community life, is why the *Book of Common Prayer* has this prayer for the evening / night: "Be present, oh merciful God, so that we who are wearied by the changes and chances of this life may rest in your eternal changelessness."

Let me give you an example of just some of the "changes and chances" that I've experienced in the space of 10 years, in the late 1980s to early 1990s – the time it took from completing my first Master's degree to starting my Ph.D. program – I had learned PL/on a mainframe computer, BASIC on an Apple personal computer, networked Windows PCs, and a Unix-based mini-computer but when I took my first job, I had to learn a completely different IBM system. I led the automation of manual workflows and transformed a 12-campus academic library system by successfully implementing their first integrated library system and remote access to research databases. So much change was not easy to lead but the organization was already innovative, even though not everybody welcomed the changes.

All this was before the WWW in the mid-1990s. Since then the changes caused by information and its related technologies have only escalated. For example, organizational and even classroom conflict has become more common. Shoshanna Zuboff in her ground-breaking book *In the Age of the Smart Machine* explained the phenomenon of "informating" - students now have access to so many new sources of information that was previously only available in teacher editions of the book. Thus, the global pandemic of COVID19 is new, but, all of us, whether we're digital natives or immigrants have been dealing with many of shifts of the information revolution for the last 50 to 70 years.

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The Information Age aka the Knowledge Society started in the mid 20th century. But I feel that humankind has always been challenged by the growth of information. Remember the preacher in Ecclesiastes who says, "Of making many books there is no end" – Don't they sound weary? More recently, Chad Wellmon, a scholar of German, History and Media studies has shown that the German university arose in the 19th century to solve the problems caused by the information environment of the Enlightenment – critics were complaining that too many printed materials resulted in "useless writing" and "mindless distraction."

We, Christians have always lived in two realms, a world of constantly shifting information realities and a transformational spiritual reality grounded in the unchanging Divinity.

Now, I'm going to shift our conversation a bit!

Last January, shortly after I'd arrived at LPTS, I asked our President Alton Pollard, III and he recommended Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*. When I began to read it, I was blown away. Thurman was writing about the Jesus and the Christianity I'd been taught growing up in south India. As a child I memorized the Sermon on the Mount – Beatitudes -

Howard Thurman

Howard Thurman: Autodidact and Cosmopolitan!

What the world needs is people who have come alive!
HOWARD THURMAN

and oh, how much I wanted to and tried to live it! Since then, I've been trying to learn about Thurman. My new discovery is that "Early on in his life, Howard Thurman, staked his success on books and academic success. … at Morehouse College (1919-1923) he claimed to have read every book in its library; later, when he attended a seminary and other institutions with more abundant libraries, he consumed books with the near hunger of a autodidact." (Harvey, 2019).

Autodidact is the term used to describe Howard Thurman's love for libraries and reading. It means lifelong learning. Book reading creates lifelong learners. We now have solid research to show that students who have access to a print library have greater gains in levels of literacy, numeracy, and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills. But in the digital world of today, print book reading and digital information use has become fraught with challenges. We are not only in a pandemic, somewhat forced to learn from ebooks and electronic resources which may not be the best for all of us – the research on this is somewhat contradictory – but we are also living through and fighting an *infodemic* – a term that was coined after SARS in 2003 to highlight the urgent consequence of information overload. For librarians the term *infodemic* was not new; we've been aware of the problems related to information overload since the 1960s and 1970. Cultural terms for this includes: too much information (TMI), fake news, misinformation, disinformation, speculation, conspiracy theory, propaganda, and rumor. An *infodemic* is even more deadly than the pandemic as our recent socio-political experiences have shown. The *infodemic* seems impossible to stop but the commonly accepted solution, for the last 30 years, is information literacy.

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I still remember teaching online database searching skills – using a menu system and command line searching of full text newspapers - to high school students in 1988 – in a system called DIALOG! The ACRL Information Literacy framework hadn't been developed back then but that's what some innovative librarians were teaching - how to find, use, create, and evaluate information. Even in the pre-Google era, my instruction included "opposing viewpoints" and information evaluation because of questions of trust and reliability. How do we know this information is true? Even before the advent of the public Internet, WWW, Web 2.0, and social media, information quality problems - the "paradoxes and pathologies of information" (Bawden and Robinson, 2008) – were widespread. But librarians helped scholars enjoy what I call "information wellness." Besides teaching information literacy skills to students, we protected scholars – students and faculty - from information overload through services such as reference and selective dissemination of information. Teaching hospital libraries offered "biblio-therapy" services. Systematic reviews have showed the efficacy of this treatment – bibliotherapy - on depression.

Another groundbreaking study from the 1980s (Constance Mellon, 1986) showed that up to 80% of college students were afraid to use the library. In 1989, the classic book on *Information Anxiety* by Wurman was published. In 2010, Diane Mizrachi, in the field's encyclopedia (2010) described library anxiety as the feeling of being overwhelmed, intimidated, nervous, uncertain, or confused when using or contemplating use of the library and its resources to satisfy an information need, that can result in misconceptions or misapplications of library resources, procrastination, and avoidance of library tasks. By then, I had studied the use of hyperlinks in online learning as instruments of cognition where I'd run right into the problem of cognitive overload. Hyperlinks in course lectures or notes were not always helpful to learning. Students tended to avoid them (Coleman, 2004).

The *University of Google* is a term coined by Tara Barabazon for people who think Google has all the answers. Research shows that students who google lose the capacity to sift, discard and judge. Googling is like filling yourself with fast food and fast fashion. Completely different research from science and technology studies show that search engines, e.g. Google, increase racism (Noble, 2018). They shape behavior (Dylan Roof, AME Emmanuel Church, Charleston killings 2015) Multi-tasking and partial continuous attention are other harmful results leading to failure to learn and mental health problems. Technology, it turns out, is not neutral and is capable of great harm unless we learn to harness it with our spiritual realities, and with digital wisdom. In the meantime, research also continues to confirm that libraries – its collections carefully curated and connected by librarians, and patrons to form vibrant learning communities - transform and renew minds.

Specific findings from studies of religion and theology students, faculty (and pastors) have consistently shown that this group:

1. Prefers using personal libraries to their academic libraries
2. Prefers printed text
3. Satisfices versus maximizing – satisficing means picking the first option and maximizing means putting in time and effort to get the best possible information.

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In 2004, Douglas Gragg, a former LPTS director and faculty, made important arguments for teaching Seminarians information literacy. He also pointed out that theological education has been particularly resistant to it. 16 years later, most Seminaries are still trying to get an IL program started. Our graduates who are, in my humble opinion, the world's best hope for peace are just not acquiring the advanced infoskills they need to deal with the *infodemic*. "Change is difficult, but our only constructive choice in this case to embrace it. The long-term personal and professional effectiveness of our students is at stake. If they falter in their vocations because they are not adequately equipped for life and work in the information age, it will be because we faltered in ours." (Gragg, 2004).

Let's shift again. This time I want to look at non-violence and its implications for our information realities. A major turning point in Thurman's life came when he traveled to India on a "pilgrimage of friendship" and met with Gandhi in India in 1935. Here's what Dixie and Eisenstadt wrote about it in their book about the visit: "When Thurman became the first African American to meet with Mahatma Gandhi, he found himself called upon to create a new version of American Christianity that let go of self-imposed racial and religious boundaries, and equipped itself to confront the enormous social injustices that plagued the United States during this period. Gandhi's philosophy and practice of *satyagraha,* or "soul force," (*satya* means truth) had a huge impact on Thurman. Conversations with Gandhi convinced him of the effectiveness of nonviolent resistance as the only form of direct action.

After the journey to India, Thurman's distinctly American translation of *satyagraha* into a Black Christian context became one of the key inspirations for the civil rights movement, fulfilling Gandhi's prescient words that "it may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of nonviolence will be delivered to the world."

Gandhi developed non violence from a religious principle in Jainism called ahimsa, which can be translated as love or specifically, no harm to living things. Non-violence, Gandhi explained to Thurman is a positive force. Gandhi's vision of Swaraj is also key here. Looking at the groups fighting for Indian independence Gandhi realized that their vision did not reflect a self-government of India which included the masses – the ordinary people. He realized it would not be enough to simply replace the British masters with similar Indian ones and this is swaraj. India's institutions could not mirror the British and this translated as self-rule - an independence and liberation and shared governance. "In reading Gandhi's autobiography *My Experiments With Truth* "one is immediately struck by the fact that a distinction cannot be made between his personal experiments with dietetics, celibacy, hygiene, and nature cure and his search for Truth: between his virtual obsession with health, his faith in nonviolence, and his program of sociopolitical reform." (TheIgloo, n.d.)

In 1949, Howard Thurman published *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Thurman would go on to become the spiritual mentor of an entire generation of leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, including Martin Luther King. Thurman also developed a broader international political vision that was grounded in Christ and promoted intercultural understanding. Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr. had an understanding of global unity that transcended race. They were cosmopolitans!

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In trying to find the materials on Thurman especially Gandhi's influence on him I became aware once again of the price crisis in libraries and how much of the materials in the fields of Religion and Theology are still behind closed collections and not available openly. Scholarly research should be open, I believe, especially when we have such an abundance of it. Between 2002 – 2007 (Coleman, 2005, 2007) I ran a global scholarly consortium for library and information science where I tried to increase open access to the research and intellectual output of this field. Because of the Promotion & Tenure requirements regarding print and traditional publishing however faculty participation was low. Now, however, things have changed again. California has a law requiring all state funded research to be openly accessible within a year after publication. And although faculty in Religion and Theology continue to sign exclusive / restrictive publishing agreements, transformative agreements and open access publishing already are or have become the norm in some disciplines. This shifts the role of libraries - cultural heritage institutions and premier instruments of quality knowledge and learning – re-shaping librarian roles and information ecology.

I hope I have convinced you that shifting information realities offer great promise. And I leave you with these final thoughts.

COVID19 is immeasurably sad and full of loss. How can our faith help it be transformative? As followers of Jesus Christ we have the opportunity to live into Jesus vision of heaven on earth. We can shift information realities individually and communally to reimagine and inspire the building of a better world. We can do this at the individual level for example, by learning, cultivating, and practicing *information hygiene* – habits that contribute to the spreading of truth. We pay attention. We examine the values that drive how we seek, consume, and produce information. We ensure that our information behaviors do no harm.

At the Library department level, and organizationally as the Seminary, we embrace transformative change – for example, outdated and oppressive structures are changed to reward faculty who publish open access; libraries archives and museums are integrated to build communities not just offer collections and book checkout services. We can empower Transformational Conflict rather than conflict resolution. We can use Appreciative Inquiry to enhance our strengths such as thin-place campus, unique calling to form ministers, pastors, marriage and family therapists, and small size. We are servant-leaders practicing Transformational Leadership and facilitating worker autonomy and self-management so each person can become the person God created them to be.

May we respond to the Romans 12:1-2 invitation to not conform but be transformed, renewed, with much love and in truth. I close with two of my favorite quotes. The first is an identity statement that I've crafted together from Rachel and Rosemary Freeny Harding's book *Remnants* and President Alton Pollard, III's installation address "A Divine Invitation."

"Our foundational identity is "whosoever" using the language of Zion. All of us are family, all of us are loved using the language of Jesus. There is no scarcity on this earth except that conjured by greed and fear."

The second is a poem from the *Gitanjali* by the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore. ***Tagore was writing at India's independence won after great conflict and Romans 12: 1-2 too was written at a time of conflict and factionalism.

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead
habit;
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country, awake.

May it be so,

People often ask me: Why did you come to LPTS? Why do you want leave beautiful So Cal where you've lived for 25 years? I came to LPTS for our students and learning communities. I am called. Thanks to you, who are here, have helped, and will continue to help me on my journey towards becoming the person God created me to be. I have come to shift realities.

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