

THE TRANSFORMATIONAL ODYSSEY

FINDING YOUR PATH TO PERSONAL
TRANSFORMATION AND SELF-RENEWAL



Robert Barner

The Transformational Odyssey: Finding Your Path to Personal Transformation and Self-Renewal

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ENDORSEMENTS

The road to self-discovery is one that has been traveled before. *The Transformational Odyssey* explores this journey in a unique and different way, by beginning at the intersection of academic exploration and the examination of authentic experiences. Robert Barner finds ways to challenge his readers, while also guiding each person in a way that is most logical and emotionally transcendent to them, and he does so in an insightful, compelling way. I highly recommend this book to anyone who is ready to be vulnerable and wants to grow.

—Kelvin Beachum Jr., *NFL Athlete,
Investor, Speaker, Philanthropist*

This is a dazzlingly ambitious book and it does not disappoint. Thought-provoking, compelling, and an extraordinary source of scientifically-based insight for anyone seeking to improve their lives.

—Jim Loehr, *Best-selling author, and co-founder of
The Human Performance Institute*

*The Transformational Odyssey: Finding Your Path to Personal Transformation
and Self-Renewal*, pages vii–ix.

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The Transformational Odyssey enlists the reader in a powerful journey, grounded in their own creative imagination and wells of inspiration. This road of self-renewal is exciting and dangerous and the work is not for the timid. Robert Barner knows the territory intimately and is a guide you can both trust and enjoy.

—Charles J. Palus Ph.D., Senior Fellow
Center for Creative Leadership

This amazing book, *The Transformational Odyssey*, combines two divergent forms of writing—intelligent, compassionate self-help and serious academic research. The book provides rich context and intelligent wisdom to a timely topic. A first in the genre of self-help and a delight to read!

—Dr. Leni Wildflower, PCC, Founder, Evidence Based Coaching,
Fielding Graduate University
Santa Barbara, California, USA
Director, Knowledge Based Coaching in the Workplace
United Kingdom

The Transformational Odyssey book invites the readers for a deep reflection on their meaningful life events, as well as challenging major life setbacks and losses. It encourages the readers to take a deep dive into their situation and, in return, provides fantastic support on how to cope with these challenging life experiences. The book offers a variety of impactful learning methods for self-empowerment and self-discovery.

—Vered Asif, Founder at Punkt-I, Global Leaders Development &
Associate Faculty with the Center for Creative Leadership, Europe

Give yourself a gift by giving yourself *Transformational Odyssey*. Many of us keep ourselves small. But for anyone ready to grow very tall, this splendid compendium will bring you sparkling insights, stories, step-by-step instructions, and everything you need to know about becoming the best version of yourself. This is the book that I wish I had written. But now I do not need to. Basic and erudite, *Transformational Odyssey* fires your imagination with new ways to love and tend yourself and become the total person that you did not know you could be.

—Meena S. Wilson, Ph.D., Executive Director
Genpact Centre for Women's Leadership
Ashoka University, Sonapat, India

In *The Transformational Odyssey*, Dr. Robert Barner offers what few self-help books do—a research-based journey into self-awareness leading to real and sustained change. In embarking on this journey, readers will become more attuned to their experiences, more open to others, and more effective leaders, partners,

parents, and friends. I highly recommend this book for those courageous enough to encounter transformational learning!

—Jaime Goff, Ph.D., LMFT, LPC
Certified Executive Coach and President, The Empathic Leader, LLC

A saying attributed to Paulo Coelho is, “When you repeat a mistake, it is not a mistake anymore: it’s a decision.” Reading *The Transformational Odyssey* will inspire you to be more question-driven and make the decision to learn from your mistakes. To open yourself up for self-reflection, and by that open up to a transformative learning approach—where you with an open mind allow yourself to experiment with new ideas and behaviors. By being more open to both yourself and to others you will be able to engage in more rich and meaningful relationships

—Jonas Janebrant
Vice President MiL Institute, Sweden

The Transformation Odyssey is an excellent resource for professionals who work with clients/patients grieving the death of a loved one. A healthy grief journey leads to the reconciliations of the loss and the conscious decision to construct a “new normal.” Bob Barner provides a step-by-step guide to help the griever on their journey to fully embrace life again. I highly recommend this book to mental health professionals because of the clear practical steps of treatment that even include a word-by-word guide for the clinician. On a personal level, I especially appreciate the 4C Test (clear, compelling, cohesive, circumbent) because I am quickly approaching my retirement years and need to develop a string new vision for my life. Bob’s work is applicable to all ages and stages of life. I only wish I had had such a priceless resource when I was beginning adulthood. I strongly endorse the *Transformation Odyssey* and look forward to using it with our clients.

—Laurie Taylor, Executive Director
Grief & Loss Center of North Texas, Dallas, Texas, USA

PREFACE

A Little Bit About This Book

Something caused you to pick up this book and skim through it. Perhaps you are at the point in your life where you are stepping back to reflect on how your own personal life journey is playing out. It might be that you have recently encountered a significant life event, such as the loss of someone dear to you or a major career transition, which has forced you to reassess the direction that you are currently taking in your life. Or it may simply be that you are the type of person who refuses to stop growing, and who is deeply invested in your own continued development as a human being. Whatever the reason, if you have a serious interest in engaging in a journey of self-discovery and renewal, then you have picked up the right book.

The idea for *The Transformational Odyssey* came about after I collaborated with Dr. Ken Ideus, a very talented executive coach and consultant, in our recent book, *Working Deeply: Transforming lives through transformational coaching*. Our intent in writing that book was to provide experienced coaches and leadership development professionals with an applied method for helping their coaching clients engage in the “deep work” of transformational learning.

A funny thing happened as we sent out advance copies of our book to our coaching clients, and to selected colleagues and associates. Several readers asked

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us if we had ever considered writing a similar book that could help them take greater control over their own self-development. One of the things that these feedback providers shared with us was that they were particularly interested in understanding how to work through those opportunities for learning that sometimes accompany critical and challenging life experiences.

I had a particular interest in these inquiries since an important part of my academic writing and instruction has involved the topics of mindfulness, life stories (narratives), and transformational learning. These suggestions got me interested in exploring the genre of self-help literature to find out what had already been written on the subject of self-directed approaches to transformational learning. Sad to say, I was very disappointed in what I found. I soon discovered that many of the so-called “self-help” books that have been published (and I read quite a few in preparation for this writing project) merely skim the surface by offering only a simplistic advice-column approach to this topic. Having concluded that there was a need for a book that went deeper than easy platitudes and homespun anecdotes, I launched into this work.

In *The Transformational Odyssey* I strive to take an approach that is far more ambitious, and one that I feel will be much more valuable to my readers. This approach incorporates my forty years of experience as an executive coach, counselor, and talent development expert. It is also based relevant research in the field of human development, including such exciting new fields as narrative analysis, mindfulness, and the exploration of future selves. I have written *The Transformational Odyssey* in a conversational style, just as if I were sitting down next to you to share my advice and counsel in the role of your personal coach and advisor. Whenever possible, I have tried to share with you some of the same personal development methods that I have successfully introduced to my executive coaching and consulting clients.

In the following pages you will not find easy, cookbook solutions to your life problems. Instead, I have attempted to provide something that is far more valuable; namely, a structured and applied approach for identifying the types of *questions* that you need to consider in order to advance in your life journey, along with a proven methodology for *exploring* those questions in a deeper and richer way. These questions and learning methods are designed to help you become more deeply self-reflective on your current life situation, identify your most important resources for supporting your own personal growth, and test the boundaries of what you know about yourself as a person.

I believe that, at its best, learning represents a kind of crazy quilt mosaic; an intertwining of inspiration, imagination, and creative ideas. If you stand too close to a mosaic, at first the colors and components blur together into a confusing blur. Mosaics take on deeper meaning only when you have stepped far enough back to take in the overall pattern. Similarly, in designing this book I have strived to find ways for you to occasionally step back and take perspective. As you read, I encourage you to treat this book as you would a reference guide on nutrition or

fitness. By this I mean that the way to obtain the best benefit from this book is to periodically pause to apply the advice that you will find here. In addition, at times in your reading you may encounter an idea or suggestion that is unfamiliar to you, or with which you strongly disagree. If you do, I encourage you not to take my recommendations at face value. Instead, form your own opinions based on your review of the *Related Research* section that I have provided in every chapter.

Having worked with hundreds of coaching clients and graduate students, I know that people learn in different ways. Some people grasp an idea more readily when it is converted to an analogy or metaphor, while others prefer that learning proceed in a straight-forward fashion. As a result, in creating *The Transformational Odyssey* I have made use of a variety of learning methods, including cases, exercises, suggested actions, famous quotes, metaphors, and relevant research in the field of human psychology.

I designed *The Transformational Odyssey* to serve the needs of those individuals who are attempting to engage in self-discovery, or work through difficult life changes. Having said that, many others should also find this book to be a valuable resource. If you are a professional coach, counselor, or talent development professional, in the following chapters you will discover a variety of self-help tools that you can use to support the personal and professional development of your clients. It is my hope that *The Transformational Odyssey* will also prove valuable to those instructors of college courses in the areas of transformational learning and personal development.

If you are ready to make a significant change in your life *The Transformational Odyssey* can serve as a starting point in your journey. In reading and working through it, try to keep an open mind and take some small risks by experimenting with some of the suggested techniques and methods. Finally, although this book has been written as a self-directed guide, I know that quite often the process of transformational learning requires the support and assistance of a skilled helper. Depending upon your needs, that helper can take the form a coach, counselor, or trusted confidant. Having worked as a counselor, consultant, and coach, and having benefited at different points in my life from the guidance and help of such professionals, I appreciate the many ways in which helpers can encourage individuals to grow and develop. For these reasons, throughout this book I discuss the role that a helper can play at each stage of your transformational odyssey. These roles include serving as a listening post and sounding board, listening to your story without imposing judgment, and challenging you to construct a more vivid and viable picture of your desired future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Since I will be serving as the guide for your journey, let me tell you a little bit about myself. Knowing a bit about me will enable you to understand the background and experience that inform the approach I take to the subject of transformational growth. After completing my first graduate degree in counseling psychology, I spent the next few years working as a counselor, both for a state agency within a therapeutic treatment center for substance abusers, and in private practice, within the area of adult transition counseling. The next thirty years of my professional life were spent working in the corporate world, both as someone who was responsible for assessing and developing senior leaders, and as an executive coach. In my role as executive coach I worked with executives who tended to get in the way of their own success, with high-potential leaders who were being groomed for broader leadership roles, and with professionals who were attempting to explore different career paths. Along the way I obtained a second masters in organizational psychology, and then a doctorate in this discipline. I also wrote a couple of books (the one that you are reading is my ninth), was fortunate enough to see my writing translated into several languages, and began to test my concepts about human development through the tough crucible of academic writing. [Nothing makes you more humble than watching the journal article that you have painstakingly written being ripped to shreds by your peers in blind reviews.] Thirty plus

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articles later, that process has helped me develop a more disciplined approach to my writing and thinking.

Eight years ago I decided to make a major career change and take on a new vocation, that of university professor. Since that time I have never looked back. I love the incredible job satisfaction that I get from my teaching, as well as the opportunity to pass on my knowledge and experience to my students. Part of this work has involved training hundreds of new coaches through our university's *Executive Coaching Certificate Program*. Concurrently, I maintain a boutique consulting business in the areas of executive coaching, leadership development, and life transition coaching, while continuing to teach, write, and consult with organizations. The helping roles of college instructor, counselor, coach, and leadership developer are all very different, but if you look at them through the broader lens of human potential you can see that they all have something in common. In each case they employ questions, conversational strategies, and developmental tools that help people look deeply inside themselves, with the aim of encouraging others to explore options for gaining greater satisfaction and fulfillment, in both their work and personal lives.

While no book can be all things to all people, I sincerely believe that if you are willing to not only read this book but also apply the tools and exercises that you will find here, you will be surprised at how far you can advance along the path of your own life journey. It is my heartfelt hope that you derive great value from *The Transformational Odyssey*. If my work is sufficient it will make you think. If I have done a good job it will prompt you to action. If I have put my heart and soul into it, it will move your spirit...and that is the most significant thing that any writer can truly hope to achieve. With that in mind, let me encourage you to start in and let's see where your journey takes you.

—Robert Barner, PhD March 25, 2017

INTRODUCTION

Beginning Your Journey

WHEN IS LEARNING TRULY TRANSFORMATIONAL?

Every day we are confronted with a vast amount of new, and often conflicting, information. We read an article about the questionable benefits of a new vitamin supplement that we have been using and wonder whether we should stop taking it. We listen to a podcast from an advice columnist offering five simple steps for creating new loving relationships and consider whether we should implement them. We hear from different co-workers conflicting comments about how well we appear to be settling into a new job, and attempt to step back take an objective look at ourselves. Each day we don the roles of concerned parent, innovative entrepreneur, caring friend, partner, or spouse, and occasionally we pause to ask ourselves how well we are succeeding within each of these roles.

In all of these experiences, we strive to engage in learning that can help us make sense of our lives, achieve a feeling of personal fulfillment, and derive meaning from the world around us. Not all learning is the same, however. It is helpful to think of personal learning as taking place within three consecutive and interacting layers, each of which yields something of very different value. Understanding the

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difference between these three levels is the first step to knowing whether you are involved in a learning process that merely adds a few facts to your memory banks, or one that fully engages you in a way that is truly life changing and personally transformative.

Level 1: Instrumental Learning

The most common kind of learning, called *behavioral* or *instrumental learning*, involves gathering facts and information, mastering new skills, or changing problematic behaviors. You engage in instrumental learning whenever you attempt to improve your communication skills, learn to play a musical instrument, strengthen a leadership competency, or attempt to undo a bad habit.

Level 2: Personal Self-Reflection

While instrumental learning is certainly useful and may even prove personally fulfilling, it can only take you so far on the path to self-discovery. Inevitably, at some point in your life journey you will find yourself dealing with life questions and personal issues that require you to “go beyond the facts.” You may be trying to understand why someone who was close to you has decided to distance herself from you, why your future suddenly seems so confusing or why, after having achieved a long-sought personal goal, you feel disappointed with the outcome.

In any of these situations you need to engage in a different type of learning; one that requires you to shift your attention from facts to feelings; from learning about the world at large, to discovering how you make sense of, and interpret, that world. In other words, you need to dive a little deeper to engage in *personal self-reflection*. This second level of learning is derived from the kind of insight you gain when you hold a mirror up to yourself for self-review. The starting point for operating at this second level of learning is to ask yourself the right questions (I will share some examples for you later on in this book), and to perform a closer examination of the decisions you make and the actions you choose to take. As you do, you begin to uncover how your life experiences reveal meaningful underlying patterns regarding your core values, personal needs, and life goals. In my coaching practice I have found that one way in which individuals demonstrate that they are beginning to work at this level of self-reflective insight is when they begin to explore how they might be working for, or against, their own personal and professional goals.

Level 3: Transformational Learning

Personal self-reflection can take you far in your life journey. At the same time, we all encounter moments where we sense that we are standing at some critical crossroad in our lives, where self-reflection is not enough to help us find our way forward. In these moments, the choices that lie in front of us may appear very limited or be completely unknown. At the same time, we know that the next few