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Scepticism reigns, but we can change still for the better

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At the beginning of Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner*, Amir's old friend Rahim Khan asks him to come back to Afghanistan. Amir reports: "Standing in

the kitchen with the receiver to my ear, I knew it wasn't just Rahim Khan on the line. It was my past of unatoned sins." Khan adds: "There is a way to be good again."

The idea of finding "a way to be good again" is deeply attractive to me, for a reason I'll come to. Yet despite how desperately many of us yearn for radical personal change, we live in a culture not always optimistic about its possibility.

Consider the cherished ideal of authenticity. "To thine own self be true," as Polonius instructs his son Laertes in *Hamlet*. Philip McGraw, the psychologist and American talk show host known as Dr Phil, reflects: "In the moment of vision, what is disclosed is not something outside yourself; rather, it is you yourself."

The problem is, by ruling out "something outside yourself", authenticity seems to preclude the kind of change Rahim Khan talks about in *The Kite Runner*. The promise of moral transformation presupposes a distinction, as the philosopher Charles Guignon points out, "between what you currently are — your uncultivated self or 'unevolved' self — and an image of what you can become . . . that is, if you realise your potential and purpose as a human being." The ideal of authenticity confines you, that is, to your uncultivated self,

to the traits, habits, foibles and flaws that constitute you. Authenticity is a distinctly static ideal, you're stuck with who you are now.

Psychoanalysis is not optimistic about radical personal change either. In his latest brace of books, *On Wanting to Change* and *On Getting Better*, the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips expresses deep scepticism about notions of cure, conversion and moral transformation. Why? Because such notions assume “that the patient is thoroughly in the know about his own life; he knows what he really wants, and knows what the consequences will be of this successful wanting”. But often we do not know what we really want; we can be elusive to ourselves.

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Not all the time, though. Sometimes I really do know what I want. Particularly when I encounter people who inspire me because

they're living the kind of life I know deep down I am not living: a better life, a way of life more becoming to a human being. I know I want to be different from who I am now.

Take my anger issues. Now, I think you'd like me if we met. I'd be gracious. I wouldn't come across as narcissistic (I'd ask you questions about yourself). But the truth is that surface conceals depths, so come not between the dragon and his wrath.

My anger is usually provoked by strangers: an opponent on the football pitch, another driver on the road, a fellow commuter on the train. Someone transgresses a boundary and I cannot let an infraction go. Even if no clear and present danger exists to anyone, I'll lock into a duel with that person. I'll challenge them and I won't care where my actions lead. Nothing else matters for a moment. All that counts is winning.

Deep down, I long to have different reactions when provoked. I know I want to be a gentler person, and know I am not that. Rage is my reaction; the value of being vindicated trumps others.

In a particularly luminous verse in the New Testament, St Paul writes: “And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (II Corinthians iii, 18). St Paul is alluding to personal transformation in the here and now, to the possibility that I might be radically changed — to become the person I am not currently but want to be — this side of the afterlife. (St Paul is not talking here about the “beatific vision” or Heaven at this point.)

St Paul is saying that as you fix your attention on Christ (“the Lord’s glory”), in service, prayer and worship, over time you will turn into that which you admire. You will be “transformed into [Christ’s] image”. Christ’s character — his integrity, courage and gentleness — will rub off on you.

What does that mean? It means, I think, and hope, that your instincts will be rewired, your attitudes reshaped, your reactions re-wrought. And in the next verse Paul suggests how that happens. God, that is, pays for what he orders. God doesn’t just recommend we be transformed and leave us to it. The ever-increasing glory “comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit”. The strength to do this, to find a way to be good again, is a gift.

James Mumford is an author and journalist

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