transformation formations

I have mentioned "transformation" throughout this book without fully exploring what it means. By example and by assumption, I have tried to convey what it means in the context of a story. This chapter explores it in a bit more depth.

Transformation is change on steroids. Whereas changes can be small, transformations tend to be big. We change our socks but we are not transformed when we do so. It is the transformation of characters in a dramatic work that gives the audience a chance to transform as well. Character transformations also help create depth and universality.

How do people change? And more specifically, how do characters in stories change in ways that work for the listener?

The catch-all definition I use for transformation is "slaying internal dragons through attitude adjustment." The adjustment is necessary because of "the hero's flaw." The flaw identifies a hero's imperfection and how s/he needs to transform to address it. The flaw also tends to define the nature of the challenges that s/he will face during the course of the story. While this definition works in a general sense, let's get specific. Let's look at a few ways of understanding transformation so that you have more control of what you can do with your story.

The Eight Levels of Transformation. In my reading, listening and viewing of stories, I find eight basic levels of transformation. Characters can transform at as many of these levels as make sense. The levels are not mutually exclusive by any means, therefore characters often transform at more than one level at the same time.

The Eight Levels of Story Character Transformation

Level	Kind	Explanation
1	Physical/kinesthetic	Character develops strength or dexterity. Popeye eats spinach and grows muscles; 'Baby' (Jennifer Grey in **Dirty Dancing**) learns how to dance and wins the contest.
2	Inner strength	Character develops courage, overcomes fear, at great risk to themselves. Lucilla and Proximo (Connie Neilson and Oliver Reed in **Gladiator**) help Maximus (Russell Crowe) in his effort to restore the republic of Rome.
3	Emotional	Character matures, thinks beyond his or her own needs; Hans Solo returns to fight the good fight in **Star Wars**.
4	Moral	Character develops a conscience; Schindler develops his list
5	Psychological	Character develops insight, self-awareness. Neo (Keannu Reeves in **Matrix**) understands who he is in relation to the Matrix.
6	Social	Character accepts new responsibility with respect to family, community or a group; Max (Mel Gibson in **Road Warrior**) sticks around and helps the small oil refinery community defend itself against terrorist bike gangs.

Level	Kind	Explanation
7	Intellectual/creative	Character advances intellectual/creative ability to learn or do something new, allows him/her to solve a problem, puzzle or mystery (Neo in the **Matrix**). This level captures the essence of making students heros of their own learning stories.
8	Spiritual	Character has an awakening, which changes his or her entire perspective. With the help of a lama, Larry Darrell (Bill Murray in **Razor's Edge**) achieves a kind of enlightenment that alters his perspective of what is important about life.

How did William transform in my story? Physically/intellecutally he learned some new keystrokes. But he also gained courage and maturity in order to accept advice from a little girl in order to solve his problem. Ultimately, he changed a number of attitudes about society, particularly with respect to how teaching and learning happens. Mull over these levels of transformation. Think about the stories that you find powerful, and ask yourself how their main characters transformed.

Consider B Action movies for a moment and why they tend not to stick with you. While they usually contain a lot of conflict and resolution in the form of endless fighting, there is very little internal conflict; very few inner dragons are slain. The good guys tend to be good, the bad guys tend to bad, and no one transforms. Just a lot of fighting. Boring. And what does boring really boil down to? Unmemorable.