

Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes

A joint sermon by the Revs. Makanah and Robert Morriss

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Change is the one constant in life, paradoxical as that may seem. There is not one of us here whose life has not changed in ways both small and great within the last six months. Six months ago it was April. Think back and reflect on the changes and transitions that have happened for you since then.

William Bridges, a writer, lecturer and consultant on human development, suggests that change is situational – the new home, the new boss, the new job, the new retirement, the new partner, the new minister...but “transition” is the psychological process we each go through to come to terms with the new situation. Change is external, transition is internal. (Bridges, *Managing Transitions*, p.3).

This past week we brought news of a “change” to you the members and friends of this wonderful congregation. We shared our news that we will be retiring next spring. And with this news, we all entered into a time and an experience of transition. As with all transitions, this one has its sadness over the impending loss of our direct connections with each other, its sense of excitement over new possibilities for you as a congregation and for us in our retirement, and a major sense of uncertainty over all those aspects that are unknown to you and to us at this point.

In our next six months together, we will be experiencing this transition as a community and also individually. And since change and transition are the warp and woof of existence, perhaps the next six months can help us all develop some new skills and tools for the weaving of the tapestry of our life journeys.

Some of us like change for the most part and some of us do not. Change, however, does not take that into account. As our focusing quote at the top of your program says, “To exist is to change, to change is to mature, to mature is to go on creating oneself endlessly.” (Henri Bergson)

So here we are, changing and maturing and creating ourselves endlessly in ways which can magnify the compassion, the harmony and the joy that is possible in a mindful, generous, truthful life.

Over the centuries, those who have reflected on the changing nature of individual and shared lives, have understood that there are three aspects to transition – the internal response to change. William Bridges terms these three “the ending,” the “neutral zone,” “making a beginning.”

And although it would seem like one aspect follows out of the other, as Bridges points out, it is never quite that tidy – with aspects overlapping and touching in a variety of ways.

We know from the cycle of nature that beginnings only happen out of endings. The butterfly is born as the caterpillar ends. The tadpole phase must be completed before the frog can emerge. Graduation from school signals the beginning of one's entry into adulthood.

“The ending” involves disengagement, dis-identification, disenchantment, and disorientation. In the case of education, as we complete a course of study, we disengage from a particular educational institution, bidding farewell to teachers and professors, shedding a schedule of classes and papers and tests and requirements. We dis-identify as being a student at that particular school. We may become very aware especially in the final months or year in that program that we are feeling constrained, we want more freedom, more room, more “something.” We feel dis-encharmed and can sense ourselves wanting something new, something somewhat different – it may just be a kind of amorphous feeling at first, but it is a nudge, an indicator that we are heading into transition. Dis-enchantment includes looking at a current situation or at oneself with realistic and honest eyes and seeing the need for change, appreciating what has been, and still looking ahead with new eyes.

There are times in our lives when we feel “disillusioned” by a situation or a relationship. We had thought it was going to provide us with A, B, or C and it did none of these. Bridges points out that the difference between disenchantment and disillusionment is that the disenchanted person moves on to find and create a better future, while the disillusioned person often stops and goes through the same play again with new actors.

Endings are often hard, and sad, and confusing, and can even be disorienting. Endings occur when we are losing a relationship, or a structure, or a place, or an activity that we have known and loved. And we may not have chosen this ending, this change. We do not necessarily want it to be happening.

As William Bridges says, “the ‘reality’ that is left behind in any ending is not just a picture on the wall. It is a sense of which way is up and which way is down; it is a sense of which way is forward and which way is backward. It is, in short, a way of orienting oneself and of moving forward into the future.”

When we know and understand that endings include disengagement, dis-identification, and often a kind of disorientation, then we can find ways to give ourselves the time and space to move through these feelings, not denying or exaggerating them, but recognizing them, acknowledging them as part of the process, and moving through them at our own rate of speed.

For Bob and myself, moving out of our roles as your called ministers, and identifying ourselves as active professional spiritual and religious leaders means we will need to be mindful, attentive to the process of disengaging, and honest about the feelings of dis-orientation that we know will occur as we leave our professional roles. Moving into retirement often is about moving from an identity described by a noun –like “minister” - into what could be called “participial” identity – using “ing” words – gardening, grand-parenting, studying, demonstrating for good causes, riding – as ways to describe the spending of ones days.

The second aspect of internal response to change is what Bridges terms “the neutral zone.” In rites of initiation in indigenous cultures, this is the time when, for instance, the young people are off on their own in the wilderness, perhaps on their vision quest. They are no longer children in the

safety of the village. They have not yet stepped into their next role on life's journey. For a time they are in a space that feels neither this way nor that way. It is a holding space that offers the opportunity for the next form of being to emerge.

Did you know that scientists do not fully understand what happens in the chrysalis that causes a caterpillar to become a butterfly? There are many aspects of the process that are understood but not all of it.

If one tries to help a monarch butterfly out of its cocoon instead of letting it break out itself, the butterfly is not able to fly – its potential has been damaged.

The neutral zone is kind of like a cocoon. If we ignore this phase, if we say it does not matter, that we can move directly from ending to the next beginning, we are not offering to ourselves the gift of creative space and time. Many of us have probably had the experience of beginning a new friendship or relationship too soon after another one had ended. We rushed into a beginning out of our sense of loss – but often what we grasped for turned out to be an illusion. We need to let ourselves gain a clearer sense of ourselves at the time of an ending and to honor the neutral zone of being for a while. We need the space to see clearly who we have become and which direction truly beckons next.

Our culture and society is not good at affirming the neutral zone. We tend to rush and hurry in the belief that we can avoid the inevitable feelings of sadness and pain if we just jump into something new. This is not fair to us as evolving, maturing, individuals in process.

The wisdom of the UUA in encouraging congregations to have an “Interim” minister the year after a settled minister has left is to provide a caring and creative “neutral” zone for the congregation to look at new directions in which they would like to head, current directions they would like to maintain, and aspects and ways of doing things which are no longer useful and which may be dropped. It's a way of gaining the time and space to nurture new wings with which to soar as well as nurturing old roots which continue to feed us well.

Our neutral zone will occur as we move to Virginia next May and settle into a new community, explore how best we might share our time and talents, what the next directions are for our life journeys. It is very tempting to rush into new activities; my commitment is to move more slowly and mindfully and trust this “chrysalis period”.

The neutral zone enhances our ability to see and understand the world differently in the gap between one life phase and the next – and in this seeing lie the seeds of creativity and possibility for “Making a Beginning.”

We like to think that we can create our own new beginnings and to some extent we can. But what we really choose are the external aspects, the possibilities for new beginnings. The new beginning is both a point and also a process. We move forward in a new direction that feels right. We take step after step, we position ourselves to be open to possibilities, and then often unexpectedly

the new beginning appears.

In 1978 as I was finishing my graduate program in religion in Richmond, Virginia, I knew that I wanted to work as a liberal holistic religious educator at a congregation in Richmond. And I had no clue as to where that might be. I had begun exploring the possibilities in congregations of various denominations in Richmond that were moderate and perhaps even liberal. I was feeling a bit discouraged, when one April day, a friend walked across the dining hall at the graduate school with a small piece of paper in his hand. He had torn out a small ad – an ad for Director of Religious Education at the First Unitarian Church of Richmond – because he thought I might be interested. I read the ad, called the phone number, went for the interview and the rest is history!

I was not Unitarian Universalist at the time. I did not even know much about UU'ism. I did have a fairly clear idea of the kind of creative religious education environment I wanted to work in. The new beginning was both a process of gaining clarity and a point of connection. And sometimes it takes quite a while for that point of connection to occur. This is where we need patience, lots and lots of patience. We need to honor our clarity of vision and our commitment to our goal and just keep taking life one day at a time, with eyes open to possibilities and options, with a heart filled with courage and love.

We love you as a congregation a great deal. We will miss you when it is time for us to say good-bye. But in the months ahead that we have together, let's learn, and practice, and support one another in learning transitional skills and techniques which can help us not only in our beloved spiritual community but also in our personal, our relational, our vocational and our creative lives.

Bob

William Bridges suggests that there are several transition techniques or “tools” that can be of help in moving through change as individuals in our personal lives as well as in a community experiencing change. If we are to handle change in a way that promotes a positive transition there are important elements in the process:

1. Taking the necessary time – the time to come to terms with the changes that are occurring, time to be gentle with one another and ourselves over the variety of feelings that come up whenever aspects of life are in flux;
2. Arranging for temporary structures – for the congregation this will mean a Board committee choosing and hiring an “Interim” Minister for the 2006-2007 church year to help you explore new directions in which you may want to head, current structures/programs you want to maintain, and those aspects/structures of congregational life that are no longer useful and can be let go. It also involves the creation of a search committee, representative of the diversity within this congregation, which will both survey the congregation and solicit input from all sources to establish a congregational profile so that as you call your next minister(s) you will be calling

someone prepared to address the full range of current congregational visions and needs. For us, it will be planning our process of moving to Forest, VA.

3. Recognizing why we all may feel uncomfortable at times – change is challenging and brings up a wide range of memories and feelings; being honest and clear about whether these feelings relate to the current situation or are “old stuff” (replaying our worst fears from previous situations) can help a great deal; being gentle and kind with ourselves and each other can help as well;
4. Taking care of ourselves, one another, and our community in small and large and fun ways is very important. The many annual fellowship events that happen are ways in which we can affirm our sense of community – the Thanksgiving Dinner, the Tree Trim, the Service Auction, the Un-Prom – to name just a few. Maintaining the service and outreach ministries of our congregation and appreciating our time together in services, programs, classes and groups are important as well;
5. Exploring the other side of this change – what new things may be possible for this congregation? What will you and we be gaining? What will you and we be losing? Part of exploring the other side of change is acknowledging that as humans we often have mixed and seemingly contradictory emotions. We can be sad and excited, angry and hopeful, disappointed and full of anticipation all at the same time – and one feeling does not in any way invalidate another;
6. Talking with someone – this is always a good way to make sure we don’t get stuck in one way of viewing the change process – such as focusing completely on the negative or the positive aspects of the situation, either of which can impede the process of a successful transition. Fortunately, in congregational life, the typical search process involves enough surveys and discussions to help establish a congregational profile that there are plenty of conversation starters – if folks will just follow through;
7. Finding out what is waiting in the wings of your life as a congregation and for us in our life as we retire – There are unlived potentialities within this congregation and within us that are not yet explored. Transitions clear the ground for new growth. What new growth is ready to germinate in this season of your life and the life of our congregation? And
8. Remembering that new beginnings are both a process and a point – as we individually and collectively achieve a clear vision of our direction in the new future and nurture our sense of patience with the process, we will be most open to the amazing options and possibilities that will most certainly occur.

Transitions done well do help us “make sense” of life’s changes and with luck will enable us both to mature and to go on creating ourselves endlessly.

So may it be.