

Change and Transition

Clarifying the difference between change and transition:-

Change is situational; promotion, redundancy, retirement, bereavement, a house move etc.

Transition on the other hand is psychological. It is not those events, but rather the inner reorientation and self- definition that you have to go through in order to incorporate any of these changes into your life. Without a transition a change is just a rearrangement of the furniture.

Change is driven to reach a goal but **transitions** start with letting go of what no longer fits or is adequate to the life stage you are in. The **transition** itself begins with letting go of something that you have believed or assumed, some way you have always been or seen yourself, some outlook on the world or attitude toward others. "What is it time to let go of in my life right now?" This question marks the difference between **change and transition**, for the latter must start with letting go. Finding out what it is time to let go of often provides the way to initiate **transition** meaningfully. Unfortunately, we are more likely to ask "What new thing can I add to my life?" We have to start with **endings**, letting go of whatever it is time to let go of, before we can make **new beginnings**.

Sources and Types of change in our life.

James W Fowler in his book "Faith Development and Pastoral Care" writes about the dynamics of change:-

"If there is anything we can safely assume that we share with our contemporaries in a society like ours, it is the experience of relentless, ongoing, disruptive and dislocating change."

He describes three categories of change in our lives:-

Developmental change

Physical- the bodily changes that occur to us from birth to old age, some of which are predictable and in common with others, some of which are unique to us personally. These changes affect our social roles and self- image (e.g. the aging process and all that goes with it.)

Mental- Perception and cognitive change. The way we perceive, construct, interpret and make sense of the world around us. This affects our memories of the past and our anticipation of the future. (How might this be affected by depression or the onset of dementia?)

Emotional- Patterns of feeling, habitual dispositions, deep longings, motives, attitudes and values. (Could this include conditioned responses to circumstances and reactions to other people?)

Social- Capacity for moral reasoning, and conceptions of social justice and responsibility. (Could these be influenced by family upbringing, school, church, strong friendships, mentors and role- models; Current social and political movements or trends.)

Spiritual- Development of faith. This marshals all the previous dimensions of the self in response to God's being and action made known through His self-disclosure and revelation and the ability to live that out in relation to our neighbours.

These changes go on though out life but may be focussed in a time of "crisis" or "turning point", where things *must* change. These types of change may be positive or negative. When the word "Crisis" was first translated into Chinese the translators used two characters, one meaning "danger" and the other meaning "opportunity"!

Reconstructive Change

This rarely happens by elective choice alone, the imperative for deep ongoing change in our lives usually comes in response to some experience of ship wreck, failure, spiritual struggle or illumination. Reconstructive work may be necessary because of a legacy of past failure. It may come out of the choices or influences that others or our environment placed upon us. It may also occur because of our own choices, neglects or persistent weaknesses. All of these are the results of the Fall in others, the world around us or within ourselves. What makes times of breakdown, failure, and deconstruction so important in our lives is that they, with all the pain they bring, represent occasions when some significant structure of our fallenness has to be addressed. We cannot escape the consequences of the wrong choices of others or ourselves and there will be varying degrees of woundedness and distorted patterns of relating to others.

Change as response to intrusive marker events

e.g. Bereavement, divorce, marriage, child birth, retirement, redundancy, "empty nest", heart attack, cancer or some other serious illness, house moves, job changes etc.

Marker events in our lives are events after which our lives are never the same again. Some marker events are less disruptive than others. Some come more or less on schedule as part of the expected flow of our lives, e.g. leaving home, first job, marriage, birth of children, children leaving home and marrying, retirement. These can be anticipated and prepared for. Many are happy events that we do not expect to upset us. And yet when they occur we often find that the adjustments they require and the emotions they arouse are greater and more disruptive than we had anticipated.

And then there are the marker events "that blast the landscape of our lives and shred the veil of our temples beyond recognition" (Fowler). These events, against which none of us finally has protection or guarantees, can be prepared for in limited ways by living day by day a life of faith and trust in a God who loves us and brings meaning and purpose to our lives and by being part of a community of faith and support.

Dynamics of Change and Transition

Change and transition is a powerful, transformative process. Important change in our lives involves three major phases – endings, the neutral zone and new beginnings.

Endings

“Each significant ending in our life involves to some degree a symbolic death”

Endings usually have five aspects:-

Disengagement – We experience disengagement whenever we give up a significant connection to some context of relationship and shared meanings that has become important to us. Disengagement begins the process of change. Divorces, deaths, job changes, moves, illnesses and many lesser events disengage us from the contexts in which we have known ourselves. They break up the old cue system that served to reinforce our roles and to pattern our behaviour. It is as if while a system is working we cannot imagine another way of life and an alternative identity.

Dismantling – Whilst disengagement stops old signals and cues from being received, it leaves untouched the life infrastructure that you have constructed in response to those signals. The action of “leaving” or “loss” can happen in a moment but the old habits, behaviours and practices that made you feel like yourself can only be “dismantled”. They have to be taken apart piece by piece. For example, in the grieving process the mental and emotional movement from thinking about oneself as part of a “we” to thinking of oneself as an “I”. This slowly impacts the person, the relationship and the identity one has lost.

Disidentification - In breaking or losing old connections with the world, we lose important ways of self- definition. A loss of identity or of not being quite sure who you are any more. This is the inner version of the external disengagement process. This can be especially difficult in losing a job, retirement etc. since it involves the loss of old established roles, titles and positions important to a person’s identity; the impact can be greater than imagined. Our security can be wrapped up in the label. An old identity stands in the way of transition, transformation and self-renewal. We need to loosen the bonds of the person we think we are so that we can go through transition toward a new identity.

Disenchantment – In a person’s head there is still a picture of “the way things are” which ties the person to the old world with subtle strands of assumption and expectation. The discovery that in some sense one’s world is indeed no longer real is what is meant by disenchantment. Endings mean giving up some part of our previous construction of reality; some valued part of our world is no longer real. In order to really change we must recognise this and allow the clearing away of the old to allow the new to grow. The danger at this point is if disenchantment leads to disillusionment, which stops the move into transition and leads someone into circles of searching for something lost, in a way that arrests growth and development.

Disorientation – The “reality” that is left behind in all endings, was our way of orientating ourselves and of charting how we moved forward into the future, so when disorientation occurs – we have lost our bearings and our familiar moorings, we feel like shipwrecked sailors. We feel unable to plan for the future. We might lose interest in old goals and plans. This loss of motivation and direction is frightening to many people and to those around them. Energy is diffused and absorbed into trying to grasp what has happened to us. Disorientation is meaningful but it is not enjoyable. It is a time of confusion and emptiness,

when ordinary things assume an unreal quality. Things that used to be important don't seem to matter much anymore. Disorientation may affect not just space but time, since we have lost the old ways that structured our time in moving from job to retirement or unemployment, from a home full of family to an "empty nest". We may resist a time of transition for fear of a time of emptiness but before we can find a new something, we must deal with a time of nothingness.

Looking back at these five words, only disengagement refers exclusively to external things. It is the internal things that hold us to the past. People who try to deal only with externals are people who walk out of relationships, leave jobs, move across country.....but who don't end up significantly different from what and who they were before, they are people who have learned to use change to avoid transitions!

Points to ponder:-

How would you describe your style of "ending" or "leaving" a situation e.g. ignore, deny, avoid, celebrate, mourn the loss?

What was your experience of "endings" in your childhood or past e.g. when leaving school, leaving home, leaving a job etc.? What did you feel, how did you react?

Do you identify with a time of "ending" at the moment or in the recent past?

Do you resonate with one or more of the five aspects of "ending" recorded above?

Why is a sense of loss often experienced as part of the "endings" in our life?

The Neutral Zone

The neutral zone seems difficult to put into words. Fowler describes it as like "the dark night of the soul". Bridges refers to it as "time out of time" and a place that is "no place" also a "nowhere between two somewheres". One is dislocated in time and space, and the structures of meaning have been shaken or emptied. The neutral zone represents a fruitful emptiness. Because we often view emptiness as loss, when what is missing is important to us, we try to find ways of replacing what has been "lost" as quickly as possible. We see transition like crossing the street, where you need to get to the other side as quickly as possible. In this light we see the neutral zone as something unfortunate to be endured and we hope that it will only be temporary. But the neutral zone provides an access to an angle of vision on life that one can get nowhere else. It helps us to see and to understand the world differently in the gap between one life phase and the next.

Bridges suggests three main reasons for the emptiness between the old life and the new:-

- the process of transformation is essentially one of death and rebirth.
- the process of disintegration and reintegration is the source of renewal.
- it provides perspective on the life stages we are going through that will produce wisdom in time.

How to find meaning in the neutral zone.

Accept the need to be there. Understand why you are there and why your life seems to be stalled at the very time changes are taking place around you.

Find a regular time and place to be alone. Give yourself time and space to stop, listen and think.

Record thoughts, ideas and experiences during this time to force yourself to slow down and to put them into words and to capture what is really going on.

Take this pause in the action of your life to write an autobiography. Because reminiscence is a natural impulse whenever something has just ended, as though you cannot really terminate anything without reviewing it and putting it into order. Fowler calls it recording “the unfolding tapestry of my life”. Martin suggested creating a time line of our life with marker events, significant relationships and experiences and the positive or negative effect that they had on us at the time.

It is important in times of transition to reflect on the past. From the perspective of the new present, the past is likely to look different. And if the past isn't the way you thought it was, then the present isn't either. Letting go of that present may make it easier to conceive of a new future. (Think of Paul's evaluation of his past, present and future in Philippians 3)

Take time to discover what you really want – your deep hungers. We often feel boxed in by circumstances saying “If only I could....”. In times of transition the limiting circumstances are part of what ends and we are no longer held back from what we want to do. But we might find ourselves saying instead “If only I knew what I really wanted.....”. Wanting turns out to be a far less clear matter than we usually imagine, for it is overlaid with a life time of guilt and ambivalence. So we find ourselves unsure and confused.

What would be un-lived in your life if it ended today?

In the emptiness of the neutral zone, what do you think and feel about the past? What was un-lived in that past, what dreams, what convictions, what talents, what ideas what qualities in you were unrealised? This is a turning point, the next phase of your life is taking shape; this is an opportunity to do something that expresses you in some significant way. This is the chance to begin a new chapter.

Take a few days alone to consciously reflect on the present transition process in your own life
The real work of transformation takes place in the neutral zone. This is a time of inner reorientation and realignment – the shift from one season of life to the next. The neutral zone is a time of listening, attending, waiting and discerning.

“It is crucial that we affirm in this place the trust and hope that the One who made us will in due season disclose the gift of new direction and restored purpose and energy.” (Fowler)

“Part of learning to trust the Spirit of God in our spirit is to trust that what we most deeply and truly yearn for has something profoundly to do with what God wants for us.” (Fowler)

Points to ponder:-

There are clear examples of neutral zones in the scriptures e.g. Christ's forty days in the wilderness facing the temptations. The fourteen years Paul spent between his conversion and before entering his life's ministry. Moses forty years in the desert of Midian between the early years in Egypt and his call to lead God's people out of Egypt to the Promised Land. Think about one or more of these examples. What was difficult about the time? What was valuable about the experience? What lessons were learned that were vital for the future life direction?

New Beginnings

It is when the endings and time of fallow neutrality are finished that we can launch ourselves anew, changed and renewed by the deconstruction of the structures and outlooks of the old life phase and the subsequent journey through the neutral zone. How do we know when we have been in the neutral zone long enough and it is time for new beginnings, or what that beginning should look like?

"There is no formula, procedure or checklist to map the way ahead of to give us the answers. It is important not to rush things. A comprehensive, gradual reintegration of life in light of the newness that came from the neutral zone must take place, this is in order to protect the fragile new against the power of old patterns or the premature forging of new ones. This may take pastoral input from others to support us." (Fowler)

We forget how indirect and unimpressive most new beginnings really are, and we imagine instead some clear conscious steps that we ought to be taking.

Think back to one or two important new beginnings in your own past. What sparked them off and sent you in a certain direction?

Bridges says "The lesson in all such experiences is that when we are ready to make a new beginning we will shortly find an opportunity. But be aware that the same opportunity could be a real new beginning in one situation and an interesting but unproductive by-way in another."

We are not finished in the neutral zone until the inner realignment is finished and there is a renewal of energy – this energy allows our life to take a new shape and to gain new momentum.

"Much as we long for external signs that point to the future, we must settle for inner signals that alert us to the proximity of new beginnings.....this first hint may take the form of either an inner idea or of an external opportunity, its hallmark being not a logical sign of validity but the 'resonance' it sets up in us."

We may have an idea or an impression or see something that attracts us and that we could visualise ourselves doing. Sometimes a hint comes from a comment that someone else drops and we remember it.

It may come from an interest that motivated us in childhood or youth or was an unfulfilled dream that you now have time and opportunity to develop.

“Genuine beginnings depend upon inner realignment rather than external shifts for it is when we are aligned with our deep longings, and real wantings that we become powerfully motivated.....people who are motivated in this way overcome apparently insuperable obstacles to reach their goals.” E.g. total career change, going cross cultural for mission or relief work in retirement, achieving unfulfilled academic or sporting goals.

Examples of this sort are much commoner than most people realise for until recently the image of the linear career has so dominated our outlook and defined our expectations that we have underestimated how often people do make radical new beginnings during adulthood. Nor have we realised how often important accomplishments come from such turning points.

What can hold us back from making new beginnings:-

- Fears and concerns related to money and time.
- Doubt and confusion as to whether it is the right direction or are we heading for disaster.
- Continuing anxiety and fear that real change destroys the old ways that we equate with “who we are” and “what we need”
- A defensive reaction that simply wants to perpetuate the old you in a new situation.
- The effects on a relationship when only one person is embarking on a new beginning. This can bring a sense of betrayal and conflict as it requires change in the other person or in the tacit agreements and roles on which the relationship was based.

To make a successful new beginning it is important to do more than simply persevere. It is important to understand what it is within us that undermines our resolve and casts doubt on our plans.

Once new beginnings start to appear:-

- Stop getting ready and start to act – resistance can cause us to make endless preparations but never to commit to the new beginning.
- Begin to identify yourself with the new beginning, imagine yourself in the new situation and what it will be like.
- Take things a step at a time and don’t expect things to always go smoothly or to be always exciting and meaningful
- Shift your focus from the goal to the process of reaching the goal. The external changes may occur very quickly e.g. the house move, the career change, but the internal re-identification and re-engagement may still be going on.

“Endings and beginnings, emptiness and germination in between: this is the shape of the transition periods in our lives, and these times come far more frequently in adulthood and cut far more deeply into it than most of us imagined they would.....it is so essential to growth that we must learn to recognise it in our lives.”

