

## *Transitions*

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*What we call the beginning is often the end  
And to make an end is to make a beginning.  
The end is where we start from.*  
—T.S. Eliot, “Little Gidding”

Ancient Witness: Matthew 12:38-40

It was Emerson who said, “Not in our goals, but in our transitions is humanity great. “We go through transitions throughout our lives. We move. We graduate. We get a new job. Our old way of living is gone, and a new life begins. In his classic book, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life’s Changes*, William Bridges wrote that there is a threefold movement to transitions: The Ending, The Neutral Zone, The New Beginning. It might surprise you that an ending always comes first. As the poet, T. S. Eliot wrote,

*What we call the beginning is often the end  
And to make an end is to make a beginning.  
The end is where we start from.*

But there is a temptation to skip right to the last step because endings are difficult. There is a painful “disengagement, disidentification, disenchantment and disorientation.” When we’re in a transition we usually find ourselves returning to old activities and old patterns. In a healthy process we grieve, remember, celebrate and finally, let go. Saying goodbye properly helps us to truly say hello. No new time of life is possible without the death of an old lifetime. Mircea Eliade wrote about the wisdom in rituals and ceremonial rites of passage:

*In no rite or myth do we find the initiatory death as something final, but always as the condition sine qua non of a transition to another mode of being, a trial indispensable to regeneration; that is, to the beginning of new life.*

The basic pattern—death, three days, and resurrection—is found in nature, cultural wisdom traditions and religions. The Neutral Zone is that time of fertile emptiness, an important fallow time in winter, when the sense of self gestates, when we wander in the wilderness. It is a lonely time of reflection and taking stock, groping through the darkness. Being in this limbo requires patience. It’s a place where, to use Frost’s phrase, you become “lost enough to find yourself.” One rests in the Mystery and the Unknown.

Finally, we come to a beginning only at the end. As Bridges wrote:

*It is when the endings and the time of fallow neutrality are finished that we can launch ourselves out anew, changed and renewed by the destruction of the old life-phase and the journey through nowhere.*

In true beginnings we emerge with new priorities; it is not just a reenactment of the past. No new birth is easy, but it can lead to energy, confidence and clarity.

It can be helpful to know that churches go through transitions, too. Perhaps our Long Range Planning Committee can help us intentionally and healthily approach this process of endings and beginnings, with emptiness and germination in between.

One can say that this three-fold movement is also the spiritual pattern of transformation. As one of my favorite writers, Richard Rohr once said, “the life that God offers us is always death transformed.”

*Death and life are two sides of one coin, and you can't have one without the other. This is the perennial, eternal constant transformative patter. It's like a spiral: each time you make the surrender, each time you trust the dying, your faith is led to a deeper lever. The mystics and the great saints made this very clear... I think this is Jesus' big message: that there is something essential that you only know by dying—to who you think you are! You really don't know what life is until you know what death is.*

It is always some kind of dying that leads to a new life. As Julian of Norwich said, “First there is the fall, and then we recover from the fall. Both are the mercy of God.”

We see this pattern in all of the sacred texts. As the apostle Paul wrote, the old life must end before the new life begins. (2 Corinthians 5:17) And as Jesus said over and over, you must lose your life before you can find it. In our reading, Matthew has Jesus say, “For as Jonah was 3 days and 3 nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be 3 days and 3 nights in the heart of the earth.” So there is death/Good Friday then 3 days then resurrection/new life/Easter.

We see this pattern in other biblical stories of descending into darkness and death: Jesus going into the wilderness, Israel wandering in the wilderness, Elijah fleeing into a cave, Joseph being thrown into a pit. It was after this time of darkness and grief and disorientation do they emerge as a different person. The historian Arnold Toynbee noticed this “pattern of withdrawal and return” in the stories of all the spiritual giants in history.

And because transitions begin with a form of dying and loss they all involve grief. And we know the famous five stages of death and grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and finally acceptance. To make a transition we grieve, celebrate and remember the old life that is gone. And then, we let go. Just as the trapeze artist must let go of one bar before they then grabbing the other.

And so there is internal work, but there is also relational work. We say good bye, thank you, I'm sorry. We forgive and ask forgiveness. We give our blessing and affirmation. You know, I've seen people do this relational work with loved ones as they face the final transition into death, and it is a powerful, powerful thing, enabling a kind of acceptance that helps a healthy transition for everyone.

There's a story that I've read by a minister who was talking about making healthy transitions when terminating one pastoral relationship before moving on to another congregation.

*When I was a young boy, age six, growing up in rural Saskatchewan, my two older brothers and I would often decide to walk home from school over the fields, rather than along the road. It was shorter, to be sure, but occasionally we would come upon enormous thistle patches. I cannot remember seeing anything like is since, but those thistle patches sometimes used to extend for a half mile or more. In places the prickly patches would be 50 feet to 100 feet wide—in other places 10 to 20 feet. The rest of the field, laying fallow in summer, was tilled soil. We rarely wore shoes to school in the summertime, hence our dilemma: how to ross these thistles in bare feet. We did have the choice of walking around them, but, since it was the end of the day, we were all tired and hungry. We were anxious to get home. Mother usually had a snack treat for us to tide us over 'till supper. To walk around the patch would take us way out of our way. The other option was to back up and run through the narrowest part at full speed. Being the youngest—with the least speed and the smallest leg span—I always objected. I was usually over-ruled, however, by my two other brothers, who would then each take me by one hand and run me through the thistle patch.*

*I can still vividly remember the experience: running full speed in bare feet across 20 feet of prickly thistles, yelping in pain all the way. When the three of us reached the black soil on the other side, we would immediately hit the dirt and start pulling out the few thistle ends that stuck in our feet. "I had four briars get me—how many did you get?" was a sample of our post agony conversation.*

*For me this story illustrates how some pastors approach their termination periods. They rightly assume that there will be some pain involved, so their approach is to run through it as fast as they can. ("Running Through the Thistles: Terminating a Ministerial Relationship with a Parish," Roy Oswald, Alban Institute, 1978)*

In any transition, there we are often tempted to "run through the thistles," bypassing the ending and the neutral zone and going straight to the new beginning. But when we do this, there will be unfinished business that will show up in our new situation, and there isn't a healthy transition. It's important not to deny the pain, suppress the grief and not to come to a true and full acceptance.

And so in our transitions may we follow a more healthy model, trusting the mystery, trusting that out of the ashes, new life will arise.