

Transitions. Nothing remains the same. All things are in transition, all the time. Some are short and fast, others occur over a longer time frame. One would think that transitions are no big deal and that we would know everything we need to know about them. We watch our children transition from infants to toddlers to preschoolers to teenagers to adults to parents and for many of us, we watch as they transition into our caretakers.

Transitions. Since we've all gone through them and have seen others navigate these various transitions, we might be forgiven for not paying much attention to them. It would be easy to skip right by that phase of change identified as a transition. In fact, our tendency is to not notice that part of any change process that lies in between the past and the future or between the present and the future.

We go from high-school to college, single to married and sometimes, married to divorced and act as if there is no in-between. We think of ourselves as being in one place or another. We go from Fall straight into the Holiday season, or from Thanksgiving into Christmas time, without skipping a beat. It seems, it's one or the other, here or there.

In the Christian tradition, there is an identifiable time of waiting, a time of transition if you will, marked on the calendar. The four weeks before Christmas Day is called Advent. It's a time of patient, joyful waiting. It's a time of preparation for the promise of a new day, the anticipation of a new world order in which a King will rule with truth, justice and righteousness. And it's the anticipation of the second coming of the Messiah.

Even the un-churched can be pulled into this identifiable time of transition, this time of waiting. Often, an Advent calendar is used to mark and track this "in-between" time, before the birth of Jesus. One door of a three-dimensional calendar is opened each day of December leading up to Christmas Eve.

Embedded in the tradition of Advent is the recognition that one can not just flip a switch and go from one perception of the world to another. There is a recognition of the need for a transitional phase, an "in-between" time, a time of adjusting, a time of preparation for a different reality. The preparation isn't like building the foundation of a house, but rather the preparation, the change, is more psychological or attitudinal.

During times of transition, we often find ourselves in what William Bridges, calls the neutral zone. He identifies, not the particulars of change, but an underlying process of transition and its characteristic impact. He builds on a theory of change and personal development that sees transition as a natural process of "disorientation" and "reorientation" that mark turning points in our growth, and in our lives.

Bridges identifies a staged process of change when one experiences an ending. He says first there is an ending, then comes a period of confusion and distress, which can lead to a new beginning. He says this process of transition is associated with four different dynamics.

1) You find yourself coming back, in new ways, to old activities, in other words, there is comfort in what you are already familiar with. 2) Every transition begins with an ending, not just outwardly, but inwardly too. At some point we have to let go of the definitions, places and things that helped define who we are, if we are to have a new beginning.

3) It's important to understand your own historic pattern of dealing with endings AND, to understand some part of you will actively resist becoming enlightened; we always want to hang on to some part of who we have been. 4) He says, after an ending and before a new beginning there is an empty or fallow time. He uses nature to make the point: leaves fall from the trees, winter is a empty, fallow time, before green growth in the spring.

In many ways, the notion that endings are the way change begins is counter-intuitive. Our conscious minds tell us that we begin at the beginning and end at the end. That may well be so in the material world. But the change process is more a psychological dynamic and doesn't necessarily follow the same rules.

I discovered the truth of this model during seminary. Seminary, ideally, is a time and place for ministerial development, as they call it. I began seminary with visions of newness, growth and development. I soon discovered however, that we were being asked to let go of our history as members of a congregation, to let go of our sense of ourselves as lay leaders serving on committees and boards.

We were being told you can't get there from here. You have to let go of much of your prior self-definition in order to make room for the minister in you to grow. I remember vividly a time that I had to confront the old me in order for a new me to emerge. The details weren't important, but the dynamic was.

I had long prided myself on being a thinker. I thought about much and had opinions about almost everything (and that part of me hasn't disappeared...we do hang on to some of the old!). But at some point it became clear to me that having opinions wasn't sufficient in ministry. Because, ultimately, all we have as ministers is ourselves—the good and the bad of it.

At some point I understood that I needed to take a position on issues, I needed to take a stand, not merely have well thought out opinions. I realized I could change my position tomorrow, but now, in this moment, I needed to know where I stood. Because, in the final analysis, opinions really aren't worth very much.

So endings beget beginnings, with a period of unknowing, a fallow time and likely, a period of dis-ease, a period of discomfort in between. New beginnings come at a cost, the cost is letting go of the known in order to make room for the new.

Bridges' theory of change is not unlike theories of bereavement, which itself is a transitional process that begins with an ending.

The first phase of bereavement is often denial, numbness and shock. Death can be hard to accept.

The second phase is associated with a yearning and searching for the one who has been lost, we want to reclaim the familiar. Pining is a form of preoccupation with thoughts of our beloved. The third phase includes a sense of disorientation, maybe even despair. This is the fallow time, our own mid-winter, when nothing seems to take root, and we often feel adrift.

Fourth, comes a time of reorganization, a time of reintegration. We integrate the new reality into our lives. No doubt changed, we come to find ourselves again, we begin to reorganize our lives in a way that accommodates our changed realities.

Change requires letting go. It requires letting go to the unfamiliar, the un- tested. It requires living in a liminal space for a period of time. Even when we seek change, when we want things to be different, letting go of the familiar can be hard for us all. Hence, the idiom, "better the devil you know than the devil you don't".

Change requires change, and change can be hard work. Change requires walking through what appears to be the fallow time of the unknown. We are not what we were and we are not yet what we want to be. Embracing change is a courageous act. Embracing change can be a spiritual exercise. It can be a test of faith.

Years ago, when I was in the consulting business, I learned a concept that has proven valuable. A wise person once said to me: "you can't let go until you have something to let go to". At first, the concept seemed to contradict the theory of change that starts with endings, Bridges' model for example.

It took some time for me to discover the wisdom in the concept and to understand that "letting go to" supports, not contradicts, the theory that change starts with endings. Let me explain by talking about the man (or woman) on the flying trapeze.

The artist on the flying trapeze doesn't let go of the swing she's on until she knows there is something to let go to. There is a point at which, even the daring are not fools. She can't get to the new swing without first ending her grasp on the old one. But the letting go is made easier by having something to let go to.

So we come full circle. Transitions. We as individuals and we as a faith community, just like all living things, are always in transition. We are in transition from what we were to what we shall become. And the process of transition is made easier if we are willing to pay attention and seek to understand that there are stages of change.

William Bridges tells us that transition is a natural process of some form of disorientation and reorientation. And that it has a predictable sequence. My friend tells us that letting go is made easier if we have something to let go to.

As a faith community, we need to begin to ask ourselves are we willing to let go of where we have been, and what may be comfortable, in order to live into what we are becoming? Can we identify what it is we aspire to be, as a faith community, so that we have something to let go to?

This is not an easy thing I ask of us. It is not a process that allows us to simply flip a switch and arrive at a new beginning. The truth is, it's hard work, over an elongated period of time. It's work that requires that we leave no-one behind. It's work that requires courage, trust, faith in ourselves and faith in our higher calling. It's work that requires us to seek our own truth and our collective truth, in love and to honor the inherent dignity of each other.

As a client of mine once said: "change happens, it's guaranteed, the only question then, is, will we merely react to the change or will we create it?"

Amen