

## Transitions: Tuning Your Inner Compass

"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and sorry I could not travel both and be one traveler, long I stood and looked down one as far as I could to where it bent in the undergrowth...." -- Robert Frost, The Road Not Taken

In a time of transition, we become travelers to in uncharted terrain -- unmoored from the known path, yet equally uncertain of the path to come. Whether divorcing, changing careers, becoming parents, taking on new leadership roles or moving, this new path stands before us. It would not beckon us if there were not potential for growth and it would not incite tremors of doubt if there were not potential for difficulty.

One of the most helpful reflections I have heard from one of my mentors is that new developments are awkward. If they were not awkward, then they would not be new. So I take two steps forward, one back, turn a little to the right, take a few steps, stop, look around. Awkward, graceless, lurching - yet something is happening. Or maybe there is a state of reverie and flow for awhile in which you awaken to this new experience after gliding through a passage and look back from the other side to see where you are now. Then again, some changes turn out to be side-lining distractions that we vow not to repeat.

I often hear doubts from bright, accomplished, otherwise confident people going through a transition. A young adult captured the ambivalence many of us feel, saying "But what if I don't want to go back to her after I try life on my own?" Or for a new parent, "What if I do not want to go back to my job once our baby is here?" We face this situation when we are the one choosing, yet we cannot fully know how we will feel about our choice until we leave what we know behind and find out what the future holds. You may be afraid of who you will no longer be, afraid of who you will become, uncertain of your wherewithal to navigate this new terrain (we tend to label ourselves – e.g. I am a "wife" or I am a "teacher" so transitions shake our confidence and identity until we re-establish in the new role).

In his classic book, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*, William Bridges provides a checklist for someone going into relationship transition:

1. Take your time
2. Arrange temporary structures of daily life
3. Don't act for the sake of action
4. Take care of yourself in little ways
5. Explore the *other person's perspective* on the change
6. Find someone to talk to
7. Think of transition as a process of leaving the status quo, living for a while in a fertile "time-out," and then coming back with an answer.

He emphasizes inner process and discovery, cautioning against external demands and cultural norms that tell us to "fix things" and have them sorted out, calling them *traps of fast forward and reverse*.

In the awkwardness, sometimes familiar angst returns: "What will others think?" or "They will see that I do not know what I'm doing." You might exclaim to yourself, "I will be exposed for the imposter that I am!" We do not have to literally repeat our teenage years as adults - thank goodness! Yet we may feel that painful, gangly stretch first experienced when reaching for a fuller sense of adult identity. Sometimes that first movement from the end of childhood to greater independence creates a style in which we approach later changes - whether rebellious, abrupt, heroic, or otherwise.

In my work as a therapist, I have noticed how many people naturally reach for community at this time. They seek other people who are going through a similar transition or have navigated it in the past. You may want to ask, "How did you recreate your social life after a move?" or "What helped you to meet other parents?" or "Where did you go when you were pressured by family or friends to stay the same?" and "How did you know that you were making the right choice?"

We need to explore new ways of understanding the world and part of that process is telling others what we are learning and what we are wondering about -- having some "fellow travelers" on the road with us. And sometimes one person returns to a group, like a hero back from a quest, with news of the possibilities out beyond the familiar and tales of how they overcame obstacles on their journey. This person may bring wisdom to their friends, family, or community. Ultimately each of us still has to find our own way, but it helps to have heard from someone else who has done so.

It can be helpful to carefully consider who you want as a confidant? How do you feel after you share what you're exploring? Does the other person hear you and hold your feelings and ideas safely? As the expression goes, "do not throw pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet." If people closest to you are not open to your growth, spend more time with those who are or seek out new people who can understand what you are going through.

Bridges reminds us to also spend time in what he calls the *neutral zone*, a place of "attentive inactivity" where there is a moratorium on conventional activity that would maintain old roles and identity. During this time of re-appraisal, maintain fruitful routines that help you think things over - go for walks, log your daydreams, make a cup of coffee, take in nature, go for a drive alone. It may help to bring your conversations with friends and mentors back into solitary times of inner focus, away from familiar distractions, and mull over what they evoke for you.

Here is a favorite question that I ask people who are struggling with new developments and the demands placed on them: "If you could have anyone you want by your side - historical, fictional, literary or otherwise - who would it be? What qualities would they

bring that would support you?" We look for examples, mentors and guides as we learn to bring forward strengths within.

It may be a good time to take more long walks, write in your journal, resume a regular meditation practice. Choose books, music, and stories that inspire you. We need to take nourishing breaks and have time to absorb, integrate, express the changes that are going on inside. What is the nuance of how you feel, what do these changes mean to you, what feels satisfying or purposeful about this new path? Or what is too hard, too lonely and how can there be more of the right kind of support in your life? Navigate toward a genuine aloneness that allows your inner signals to be heard. Make a log of your experiences and be true to what you know. Circumnavigate the quagmire of withdrawal that could create a fog over *inner knowing*.

See if you can focus on one or two small steps - baby steps - and what your hopes are for the outcome. Be mindful of this moment. We so often want to see the whole picture, yet with new transitions it is often not possible to know the future, so we want to take it one step at a time. When was the last time you made a significant change like this? How did you decide which action or step to take each day? Would some things that helped you then help out now with this phase of your life? What is needed today to help you move forward?

Bridges has made a study of these crossroads in peoples' lives and notes that without the neutral zone and shift in perspective, we risk going back and finding yet another "rotten" boss or "terrible relationship". This is a time when the past can be re-cast in a new light, creating a backdrop for a new future. Like the two heads of Janus, Roman god of transition, we must look back at the past differently in the service of looking forward to future growth. Inner realignment toward what we yearn for in life becomes a powerful source of motivation.

In the next chapter of life, there may be communities and relationships that you separated from during the transition and now return to. Your return can be staged, re-incorporate as you are ready. Come in to your social contexts in a new way and know that others will be adjusting to the loss of your former identity. Keep your mentors and peer travelers alongside you and remember the "deep longing" that has taken you forward.

Daphne Kingma, author of several books on love and relationships, highlights questions for your reflection, such as: What is your developmental task right now, at this moment? What is your developmental growing edge? What are the most important qualities you need from the person with whom you form your next relationship? Ask similar questions about career developments: What do you need to let go of? What is waiting to come forward in your life?

As athlete Kristin Armstrong states, "Times of transition are strenuous, but I love them. They are an opportunity to purge, rethink priorities, and be intentional about new habits. We can make our new normal any way we want." The road ahead beckons -- may your travels be fulfilling and your inner compass be your guide.

## References

Bridges, William (2004). *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes, Revised 25th Anniversary Edition*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.

Kingma, Daphne Rose (2012). *Coming Apart: Why Relationships End and How to Live Through the Ending of Yours*. San Francisco, CA: Conari Press.