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IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

TRANSITIONS: EMBRACING LIFE'S CHANGES

We experience change every day. Although most of it is mundane, some life events are so significant that they interrupt the status quo of our lives and transform how we see ourselves and life itself. Each of us has experienced some transformative life changes such as these:

- Attending law school, becoming licensed to practice, our first law job
- Falling in love, choosing a life partner, getting married
- The birth of a child
- The end of an intimate relationship/divorce
- Making (or not making) partner
- The death of a parent or significant other
- Losing a job
- A serious accident, injury or personal illness
- Retiring from the practice of law

Some of these life-changing events are developmental and predictable; others are as unexpected as a bolt of lightning. Some we initiate (e.g., changing jobs, moving, getting married, starting a family), while others happen to us (e.g., illness, job termination, death of a loved one). Transition is the way we come to terms with such major life changes. It is the process of letting go of the old status quo and how things used to be, accepting how they are in the present, and moving forward and developing a new status quo in our life.

Our culture doesn't adequately prepare us to expect periods of transition. Smooth progressions through life's

developmental stages are projected as the norm. Of course, the reality is that all of us experience varying periods of relative stability, interrupted by change, loss, and instability.

Typically, our culture also fails to teach us tools for working through transition periods. We are expected to celebrate our achievements, victories, and good fortune and move on. We are also expected to accept and grieve our losses in a relatively succinct period of time, pick ourselves up by our bootstraps without too much assistance, and get on with our lives. We are not taught how to use periods of transition for personal growth and development.

The legal profession reinforces these general cultural expectations. We are trained to never show weakness or admit uncertainty. We are trained to be the problem-solvers whom others come to for advice and counsel. Many of us develop the delusional belief that we can manage the challenges of our personal life without ever losing focus.

Realistically, times of transition are disorienting, confusing, and distressing as we come to terms with aspects of our life that have changed or ended. At such times, we are often isolated from others who have undergone or are currently undergoing a similar transition. Without support or guidance, many of us in the throes of confusion and distress quickly conclude that we must be deficient or somehow doing it wrong. We believe that if we were doing it right, we wouldn't experience such negative emotions.

In reality, these uncomfortable and disorienting feelings are a normal and predictable part of the sequence of adjusting

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to life-changing events. Understanding the predictable stages of transition will better prepare you to understand the difficult and sometimes painful emotions inherent in transition. Rather than resisting the change that triggered this distress, you will be more able to accept it and embrace the lessons and new opportunities it makes possible in your life.

Three Stages of Transition

Transitions don't have clearly predictable timelines. We each move through transitions in our own time and in our own way. Transitions do, however, produce predictable feelings and move through predictable stages. Periods of transition are triggered by endings, which demand both a period of acceptance and reorientation and a period of exploration and new beginnings. Actively and intentionally working through all the stages produces new beliefs, new expectations, and a new status quo. We typically initiate or choose positive changes in our lives with a sense of excitement and possibly adventure. However, positive life transitions also entail endings and losses that trigger the same sequence of adjustment.

First Stage – Endings

As we face endings, we are challenged not only to absorb and accept the external loss (job, relationship, home, health, etc.), but, more importantly, to let go of the hopes, dreams, and beliefs that we have attached to the aspect of our life that has ended. Individuals confronting endings commonly feel shocked, numb, confused, angry, anxious, and/or overwhelmed. They report difficulty staying focused. Endings typically result in disorientation – feeling uncertain of where you are or where you're going. Things that used to be important may not matter anymore. When our familiar life roles, settings, and relationships are disrupted or change, we lose some of the important ways we previously identified and defined ourselves, thereby challenging or changing our sense of self.

Second Stage – Acceptance and Reorientation

Between endings and new beginnings is a space and period of time between who you used to be and who you are going to be. This period has been referred to by other authors writing about transition as “the neutral zone” or “the pit.” Individuals in the middle stage of transition often continue to feel confused, anxious, stalled, stuck, or lost. Much of the resistance that we experience around being in transition is resis-

tance to the uncertainty, emptiness, and unknown of this middle stage of the transition process. However, before we can move on and find something new, we must accept the changes and live with not knowing what the future holds for us.

To effectively navigate the transition process, we must surrender to the confusion, anxiety, and emptiness of transition instead of struggling to escape or avoid it. The goal is to embrace it, not conquer it. Embracing transition unlocks the possibility of distinguishing our current circumstances from past experiences and perceiving the new possibilities and options that a life-changing event creates.

During the acceptance and reorientation stage, there can be a lot of “back and forth” – taking one step forward, getting scared and confused, and retreating back toward the old status quo. If we can persevere and keep putting one foot in front of the other, a different way of seeing and understanding our lives begins to take shape. Failing to persevere through the trials of transition leaves us susceptible to reverting back to the old familiar relationship, work experience, or pattern of behavior – often just with new players. It also causes us to miss out on the opportunity for personal growth that transition invites.

When you are working to accept a life-changing event and reorient to the new reality that follows, the following activities can be helpful:

- Find a regular time and place to be alone.
- Begin to journal daily. At a minimum, note the best thing and the most difficult part of each day. Take note of the dreams you remember when you wake and the coincidences that happen to you.
- Think about past transitions. What helped you work through these earlier trials? Would any of the strategies and resources that proved helpful in the past be worth trying in your present transition?
- Take a solo retreat. Go to an unfamiliar place that is separated from your everyday life. Don't bring entertainment or things to provide distraction. Contemplate and reflect upon the transition process you are currently immersed in. Try fasting.
- Take a fresh look at the beliefs, assumptions, and expectations you held before the transition-triggering event. Are they still valid and serving you well?
- Give yourself permission to explore and discover what you really want.

Third Stage – Exploration and New Beginnings

Once you have accepted what has ended in your life and succeeded in letting go of the parts of your past that no longer fit your present circumstances, you have created enough space to explore the next chapter of your life. The first hint of a new beginning may come in the form of an idea, volunteer or professional opportunity, or relationship that positively resonates with you. It may involve imagining some scene or activity and feeling attracted to it. A new beginning is a continuation of the transition process, not something that we can start by a mere flip of the switch.

Many of us must engage in a certain amount of trial- and-error exploration before we find something that fits. Typically, starting something new feels uncomfortable, and we continue to struggle with a certain amount of self-doubt as we try things on. However, if we stay actively engaged in the transition process and remain open to new possibilities, we can ultimately identify the next right thing in our life when it presents itself.

Transition Checklist

1. Take your time. Transitions can't be rushed.
2. Don't act for the sake of action. The transition process requires self-assessment and self-exploration.
3. Understand that the transition process has an ending, a period of acceptance and reorientation, and then moves to a time of new beginnings. Expect times of anxiety; expect old fears to be triggered; expect others in your life to be threatened.
4. If your daily life structure has been significantly disrupted or altered, develop a new structure that allows you to work through the transition you face.
5. Develop an empathic support system.
6. Give yourself permission to learn new skills and experience new interactions and relationships. Take time to explore new opportunities, personal interests, and talents.
7. Take care of yourself as much as possible.

MIKE LONG

OAAP ATTORNEY COUNSELOR

Suggested Reading

By William Bridges:

- *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes; Revised 25th Anniversary Edition* (Da Capo Press: 2004)
- *The Way of Transition: Embracing Life's Most Difficult Moments* (Da Capo Press: 2001)
- *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change; 3rd ed.* (Da Capo Lifelong Books: 2009)

By Sabrina Spencer and John Adams:

- *Life Changes: A Guide to the Seven Stages of Personal Growth* (Paraview Press: 2002)