

**29 March 2009 \* Suspended between “Once” and “Someday”**  
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*“I put a dollar in one of those change machines. Nothing changed.”*  
*~ the late, great comedian George Carlin*

When I think about what it feels like to navigate change, the image that comes to mind is the difference between trapezes and buses. (I don't have personal experience with trapeze flying, but I've watched Circus of the Stars, so that qualifies me to speak of this difference.)

Think about how trapeze artists move from trapeze to trapeze: you standing on a platform, you gripping the trapeze, calculating *exactly* the right moment to swing through the air, and whirl yourself into the catcher's hands. You arc through the parabola of the trapeze's swing, and then at *exactly* the right moment, you whirl back and \*boom\*: your hands are back around your trapeze bar, and you float back up the platform.

Easy, right? You're constantly in motion, constantly have a firm grip on something or someone, and are carried by synchronicity. And let's not forget that Metaphor of All Metaphors: the safety net beneath you.

Since I *do* have experience getting from one place to another by bus, I can tell you definitively that there's waiting involved; for me, there's also a constant uncertainty factor: there are all those buses to keep straight, and even with a schedule, you're never quite sure of whether the bus will be on time. I can never remember exactly what the fare is, and worry whether I have enough quarters. When you finally get *on* the bus, it can be interesting a good way, but also interesting in a “street theatre” way, and it turns out to be a pretty slow way of getting around (all those other stops, don't you know).

Trapezes and buses are two vastly different but powerful symbols of change. When we know that change is about to enter our lives, most of us hope for a trapeze-style shift: graceful and synchronized, exactly where we need to be at any give moment, a safety net beneath. But change usually resembles taking the bus: there's waiting, and uncertainty, and sometimes messiness. There's a long travel time, the in-between liminal space, where we're neither “here” nor “there”... neither where we started, nor where we're going.

This in-between-ness is one of the richest, most fertile times for any person, any family, any congregation, any institution that's moving through change. It's also the period when most people feel like screaming, or checking out, or crying, or throwing up their hands in exasperation. And so this morning, I'm going to explore this place – suspended between “once upon a time” and “someday” – not just because our congregation is in the middle

of significant changes, but also because when a situation is both rich with possibility *and* makes you want to scream, that has “**Opportunity for spiritual growth**” written all over it.

William Bridges<sup>1</sup> is one of the country’s foremost experts on institutional change and transition. One of his most central teachings is the distinction between the two: *change* is external; situational. Change is when you move to a new house, lose a job, or upgrade to a new cell phone. Change is when your company expands, or your kid decides he wants to be vegan, or you break your arm. Change, not to put too fine a point on it, is when a community you’ve been part of for years is filled with new faces, more people than you’ve ever seen, and begins to operate in different ways.

Transition, on the other hand, “is the way we all come to terms with change.” Transition is an inner process of reorientation; it’s how we navigate *not* the outer world, but the “landscape of the heart and mind,”<sup>2</sup> as our spirits catch up to the material. In a group setting – like a family or a congregation – people undergo the same *change*, more or less, but everyone experiences the *transition* differently. That makes transition mildly hazardous territory, because it’s so easy to get lost there, or to lose one another.

We’re Unitarian in our theology, but the gospel of “transition” is trinitarian; there are three stages to this inner process of reorientation. Transition begins with a letting go: letting go of who we were, through whatever symbols present themselves as most powerful. (A simple example: When I moved to Santa Barbara, it was very hard to let go of my Bay Area cell phone number, because I lived there for 6 years. It took a full year for me to get an 805 number.)

Once we’ve begun to let go, we enter the second phase of transition, “the neutral zone.” I imagine this neutral zone, in my mind’s eye, as full of fun-house mirrors and maze-like halls, with a thick coating of sticky tar on the floor. It is, says Bridges, “is a no-man’s land where people are... ‘Wandering between two worlds, one dead./The other powerless to be born.’”<sup>3</sup> We’ve let go enough to realize how little we know about what’s next, but we don’t know enough to feel confident about plunging forward.

Bridges counsels that people in transition acknowledge that *loss* is involved. It might be clear what’s changing; we might even know what’s going to be different because of that change. But we don’t always consider who’s going to lose what. “The question that always helps you to shift your focus from the change to the transition,” Bridges says, “is, *What is it time for me to let go of?*”<sup>4</sup>

Let’s stay here a moment, and talk about how uncomfortable it is to feel uncomfortable. Few of us have perfected the art of being present in messy, confusing circumstances; as a result, we tend to soothe ourselves by looking for problems that need solving. In fact,

besides staring into fires and craving donuts, there are few things more hard-wired in us, as modern human beings, than seeking problems to fix. And when change disorients us, says church consultant Gil Rendle,<sup>5</sup> we automatically seek solutions before we know what the problems are (or *if* there are problems). We have an “almost genetic need to fix things, or to find things that are broken.”

What we’re really trying to fix, I believe, is our discomfort of being suspended between “once” and “someday.” When transition presses on us, we’re trying to avoid seeing all that we have to learn before we can move forward. How do we navigate this liminal transition space, where nothing is fixed and many things are unknown? Just like the nature of the beast itself, the strategies that I want to suggest involve *being*, not *doing*, giving them more of a spiritual nature.

First, it’s helpful to simply *know* that transition is often messy and turbulent. There’s some reassurance in knowing that our human minds work in predictable patterns, and that – although everyone experiences an internal adjustment to change in a unique way – we’re not alone in feeling loss and disorientation.

As I’ve hinted, the liminal places are also a good opportunity to “be with what is.”<sup>6</sup> Nearly every religious tradition has a contemplative practice that fosters our ability to watch without reacting. When all else fails, discomfort is a chance to practice being present, and still hold our ground. It’s a spiritual practice of the highest measure to stay balanced, and present, when the world around you shifts.

A third strategy for navigating way through transition is to move from *observing* discomfort to *naming* it out loud – without blame, without being distracted by problems that need to be fixed. Name your feelings – “I feel like nothing will be the same again” or “I miss the way things used to be” – to those who will listen with compassion and safety.

Finally, as people move through letting go and into the arriving to the new, I think it’s crucial that we *tell our stories*. The first stage of transition – letting go of an old identity – doesn’t mean that we forget or fail to honor what came before. The stories that begin with the word “once...” are crucial; they remind us that “the past... and got [us/ where [we] are today.”<sup>7</sup>

Telling our stories fulfills another function: the more we tell our stories, the more they remind us of what’s most important. As Gil Rendle points out, stories “don’t tell us what to do; they tell us what we *can* do.”

Fourteen months ago, in January 2008, I used the time for all ages to ask you what you loved best about Live Oak; the things that, if they were missing, wouldn’t make this Live Oak anymore. You said:

*...loving kindness – a feeling of community – acceptance – finding inspiration – it’s a safe place to laugh and cry – our children are visible and valued – we’re able to believe what we believe – mutual support...*

Notice that no one said “the quilt behind the altar.” Nobody said “these red chairs.” No one said “Rev. Erika” or “John Sonquist.” *Nor should you have.* Our congregation is bigger than any one person, or aesthetic detail. What’s most important are these values, which are actually one- or two- or five-word *stories*; they’re nuggets of our core values. These mini-stories don’t tell us what to do; they tell us what we’ve done, and what we *can do*. Those stories point the way for the third stage of transition: beginning the new.

Earlier, I referred to the trinitarian process of transition, which means there must be a gospel of transition (*gospel* being another way of saying “good news”)! Here’s the good news about the inner process of navigating change:

The “neutral zone” of confusion and loss might be uncomfortable, but it’s also temporary; things can’t stay in flux forever. Even better, it’s “the most naturally creative time [an] organization and its people will ever have.”<sup>8</sup> (A small example of creativity surging forth in our changing congregation is this new Sanctuary, with its very blank walls. Your leadership knows about being with what is while new ideas float to the surface. When we gather here on Easter, we’ll have a gorgeous installation of over one thousand colorful paper cranes... an idea that wouldn’t have taken shape, and connected people, if we’d simply replicated “the old” in the new space.)

The next piece of “good news” about transition is that it is indeed a fertile time for spiritual growth. Don’t mistake “change” for something that knock you off course; as I hope you understand by now, it’s something that reveals that your course was never fixed to begin with.

One last piece of good news, for those of who call Live Oak “home,” is that this spring we’ll be asking you to tell your stories, those tales about the core values that make this congregation your family. In a few weeks (after the Sanctuary has been dedicated), your Committee on Shared Ministry will be holding four “Covenant Conversations.” All are invited to participate, and anyone may attend; the purpose of these Covenant Conversations is to tell your stories about our Beloved Community at its best. When have you felt most valued, most cared about? What have you witnessed within these walls that shows love and respect for one another? These stories will reveal to us core values; your stories will indicate not who we *should* be as a congregation, but what we *can be*, as a Beloved Community.

This is the tender paradox at the heart of this place: we are *all* lifted and carried by change, but each make our individual journeys of transition. May we trust one another, as companions, as we find our way.

## Endnotes

1. For more information, see [www.wmbridges.com/index.html](http://www.wmbridges.com/index.html).
2. William Bridges, "Getting Them Through the Wilderness," p. 20.
3. From "Getting Them Through the Wilderness," p. 3. The line of poetry is Matthew Arnold's.
4. From "Transition as 'The Way Through'" by William Bridges. See [www.wmbridges.com/resources/article-way\\_through.html](http://www.wmbridges.com/resources/article-way_through.html).
5. Gil's book is *Leading Change in the Congregation* (Alban Institute), but much of what I've learned from him is from attending his seminar, and watching his magnificent presentation at "UU University" in Portland (June 2007).
6. A phrase used over and over my dear friend, the Rev. Dr. Beth Johnson.
7. "Getting," p. 7.
8. "Getting," p. 16.