

Nothing Secure But Life, Transition, the Energizing Spirit

In 1829, at the age of twenty-six, Ralph Waldo Emerson had everything going for him. In that year he became associate minister of the Second Unitarian Church of Boston. He also married lovely young Ellen Tucker. With the resignation the following year of the senior minister, Emerson was chosen to succeed him.

Sadly, within a short period of time his world came crashing down. His wife was fatally afflicted with tuberculosis. She died in February of 1831. During the year that followed, Emerson began to feel misgivings about his chosen profession. And by September of 1832 he had resigned from the ministry.

He fell into a period of depression. Alone and adrift, he decided on a voyage to Europe in hopes of recovery and renewal. He was gone for eighteen months. Even as he was returning home, however, he was asking himself where and how he ought to live. He decided to offer a series of lectures in Boston. Experiencing a renewed burst of energy and creativity, he found success as a speaker on the Lyceum circuit then spreading to cities and towns throughout New England.

By 1835 Emerson had remarried and settled in Concord, Massachusetts. His first book, *Nature*, was published in 1836. In that same year, he emerged as a leading figure of the fledgling Transcendentalist movement. In 1837 he delivered his

celebrated address, on “The American Scholar,” at Harvard. His first book of essays was published in 1841.

He had been through a lot in the previous ten years. In an early essay, “Circles,” Emerson talks about change and transition. The image he uses is that of a circle. “Our life,” he says, “is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep, a lower deep opens.”

All things—ideas, institutions, inventions—are in a state of change and flux. There is a natural tendency to resist change in the latest formulation of the truth. But Emerson insists that it is only by embracing change that there is any hope for us. “If the soul is quick and strong,” he says, “it bursts over that boundary on all sides and expands another orbit on the great deep, which also runs up into a high wave, with attempt again to stop and to bind. But the heart refuses to be imprisoned; in its first and narrowest pulses it already tends outward with a vast force and to immense and innumerable expansions.”

The same is true of our spiritual life. Spiritual growth consists of a succession of enlargements of the soul. It is a process of transformation or metamorphosis—like that of the pupa into the butterfly in the story I told earlier. It is accompanied by renewed vitality and an increase of personal power. Yet we hesitate to embrace the new. We cling to the old and the customary. We are fearful of change and feel threatened by it. But we should neither fear

nor resist it. Nature has no use for the old, Emerson asserts: "In nature every moment is new; the past is always swallowed up and forgotten; the coming only is sacred. Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit."

"Life is a series of surprises," Emerson says. We can never know where these growths and movements of the soul might take us, but we do know that they require an ability to let go of our need for surety and security. He concludes the essay with this observation:

The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety. . .and to do something without knowing how or why; in short to draw a new circle. Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm. The way of life is wonderful; it is by abandonment.

This essay is a considerable achievement for one who, only a few years earlier, had lost his wife, his career and his health. It is not simply that Emerson had recovered and moved on with his life. More importantly, he had made a successful transition and was able to affirm that there is actually something very positive to be said about it in spite of the pain that may have precipitated it. When he says, "Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit," he is speaking from his own personal experience. With transition comes renewed energy and the sense of a new lease on life. But, judging from the depths of his despair, it was never clear that he would succeed in making it.

Change is a constant in life; it is inevitable. But transition is not. This

is because we fear change and resist it. We want to hold on to things the way they were. But, as Anne Morrow Lindbergh once said, “There is no sin punished more implacably by nature than the sin of resistance to change.” It is a paradox Emerson himself recognized: the only way to hold on to life is to let go. The very things we most want to hold on to came into being in the first place as the result of change. Change then seemed just as daunting as it does now. No matter how comforting the status quo feels today, it was once new and uncertain.

William Bridges, author of *The Way of Transition*, insists that it is really not change that people resist, but transition. Changes happen: people lose or switch jobs, life situations change, loved ones die. Transitions, however, involve a process of letting go of the way things used to be and then taking hold of the way they subsequently become. In between the letting go and the taking hold again is a chaotic but potentially creative void, when things aren’t the old way, but they’re not really a new way yet either.

Transition is the way that we come to terms with change. When we resist transition it is often because the way forward seems confusing or risky. We also resist transition because it leaves us in limbo while a new reality takes shape. Although change is often immediate—you move out of an old house one day and move into a new one the next—transition takes time. This time is spent in that uncomfortable void in between the old and the new. It takes a long time after the move to feel at home in the new house.

There are essentially two kinds of transitions. One of them is

situational in nature. Something happens—a loss of employment, a move, the death of a loved one—that triggers a transition, the need to deal with or get through the change. To a large extent the cause is external, though there are often some internal contributing factors.

The other kind of transition is developmental in nature. It is not occasioned by external change so much as it is produced by a natural, unfolding our innermost sense of self. The adolescent coming-of-age and the so-called mid-life crisis are examples of developmental transition. As Emerson observed, any profound shift to a new way of experiencing the world can result in the need for a transition. Such awakenings can happen at any point in life, as one gradually or suddenly comes to the realization that a significant change has occurred, whether in a relationship, a job situation or a particular way of life.

With this shift, which is more akin to a transformation, comes the release of personal power and creative potential. We feel a sense of excitement, enthusiasm and vitality. It is as though we had a new lease on life, which, of course, we do. But, to some extent, the intensity of the result is related to the difficulty of the transition. Before these new energies can be released we must let go of the past and find our way through the void.

Transition does not require us to reject or deny the importance of our old life, just that we let go of it and move on. The break with the past may actually be easier if we honor the old life for all it did for us. It brought us this far, after all, even if cannot take us the rest of the way. Transition itself is designed to help us come to terms with change. It

is like a ferry taking us from one side of a river to the other. In this process, it serves several functions.

The first of these functions is that transition helps to reorient us. It accustoms us to a new set of realities, whether these are the realities of adulthood or of facing life after the death of a loved one. But transition is not just a matter of adjusting to an altered situation.

If we grasp it as an opportunity or embrace it as a step forward in our development, then it can serve a second function, that of personal growth. It can help us become more authentic persons. It can help us to know ourselves better and to be willing to express who we really are. In the process of becoming more authentic persons we gain access to our deeper creative impulses and energies.

There is another important function of transition as well, and that is the spiritual function. In their all-encompassing nature, transitions represent what Emerson referred to as the metamorphosis of the innermost self, "the total growths and universal movements of the soul." This function integrates all the others.

Moreover, as Emerson knew from his own personal experience, such transformations are renewing. We come out of what is actually a death-and-rebirth process with a new identity, a new sense of purpose and a new store of life energy. With the breakdown of the old reality there is a release of power that had been trapped in the form of our old lives and is now available again. This is what accounts for the sense of excitement and vitality that we experience when we've finally emerged from the void.

I experienced this kind of transformation in my own life. During the first half of the 1980s I was an associate minister at the Unitarian church in Spokane. It was my first settlement. During my time there the church had grown to over 400 members, but it was difficult for them to sustain two full-time ministers and I had to leave. This was devastating to me at the time, but it opened up new possibilities. I took a one-year interim position at Community Church in Manhattan while I looked for a new settlement.

At the end of that year I was called as Minister of Religious Education at the First Unitarian Universalist Church in San Diego. This was a congregation of almost a thousand members, with several hundred children and youth. With this settlement I came into my own as a minister. I felt enlarged and energized. In retrospect, my settlement in Spokane represented the chrysalis stage of my development as a minister, and my year in New York was a necessary part of my transition to ministry on a larger scale.

In my experience as a minister I have seen churches experience changes, especially as their ministers come and go. But their transition to new ministry is not always successful because they didn't take the time they needed to process the change and prepare themselves for new ministerial leadership. In their haste to fill the gap between one ministry and another, they run the risk of ending up like the unfortunate butterfly in our story this morning.

I used to think life consisted of relatively stable periods with transitions in between. The goal was to get from one stable period to another as quickly and painlessly as possible. But we would do well

to remind ourselves of a memorable line from the movie, "The Third Man." Harry Lime says that thirty years of turmoil under the Borgias in Italy produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance, while five hundred years of stability in Switzerland produced the cuckoo clock.

Clearly, the transition periods are more significant than the periods of stability. If life is a journey, the transitions are the traveling part; the stable periods are simply the stopovers. Perhaps it is because we do not fully understand or appreciate the role of transitions in our lives that we find them uncomfortable.

Several years after what had been an agonizing transition in his own life, Emerson came to the conclusion that "there is no sleep, no pause, no preservation, but all things renew, germinate and spring." Nature has no room for the old. Rest, conservatism and inertia are forms of aging. Of course, he was not talking about growing old, so much as clinging to the past and the desire for stability. Not only is it futile; it is counterproductive. "People wish to be settled," he says; "only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them."

Transition is more important than stability because it is in the transition times and not the periods of stability that we grow and develop and reorient ourselves. It is then that we have access to authenticity, creativity and a deeper level of spiritual awareness in our lives. The stable periods are the temporary resting places between transitions. But they are necessary for the fact that these are the times during which we incorporate and consolidate the discoveries made and the power released in the transitions.

Transitions remain confusing and uncertain. But if life were totally predictable, it would also be tedious and boring. Life is, or should be, a series of surprises, as Emerson says. There needs to be an element of the unknown and unknowable, an element of awe and mystery, an element of uncertainty and risk, otherwise there is no potential for growth or change. When change occurs, when some part of our life ends, there is no ready-made reality waiting in the wings for us. Predetermined outcomes might make things easier, but that is not the way transition works. We have to create the outcomes ourselves, and that takes time.

For those who are impatient with transitions—and I have been one of them—there is this advice from Herman Hesse, who wrote the following in his novel, *Siddhartha*:

I have taken thousands of people across the river, and to all of them my river has been nothing but a hindrance on their journey. They have traveled for money and business, to weddings and on pilgrimages; the river has been in their way and the ferryman was there to take them quickly across the obstacle. However, amongst the thousands there have been a few, four or five, to whom the river was not an obstacle. They have heard its voice and listened to it, and the river has become holy to them, as it has to me.

Transition is not a hindrance to getting on with life. It is—or should be—an essential part of life itself. For those able to hear its voice and listen to it, this is what it says: “Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit.”