

Transition and Growth

By William Bridges

For over two decades, William Bridges & Associates has helped organizations and individuals deal more effectively with change. A pioneer and leader in the field of transition management, William Bridges is widely recognized for his breakthrough thinking on how to help people deal productively with change.

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"Everybody wants to be somebody; nobody wants to grow."

Goethe

After some difficult change, people often say, "I learned a lot from that experience." It may be hard to put that learning into words, but most people find that the process of going through transition leads to growth and development. As Goethe says, however, the path of growth is not necessarily easy or comfortable.

Transition leads to growth in two different ways. The first is that in letting go of the person you thought you were, you see that some of what you thought was essential to being "you" really isn't. You discover that you are still "you" without those things, and that can be a big discovery.

The second connection between transition and growth is just as important. In the neutral zone that follows the ending, people in transition try new ways of being and doing-try on a whole new identity, in some cases-and find that the fit is good. So they give up some things and find others, and in the process their view of themselves and of the world develops. They "grow."

That's the good news. The more sobering news is that the experience of being in transition can be very confusing and discouraging. It isn't like other forms of learning, where you look for something and then find it. It is more like having the reality-rug pulled out from under you and falling flat-and then getting up and noticing that the world looks different.

That is a disturbing experience, especially when you've grown used to seeing the world the old way and when you've thought that you knew who you were. But when transition comes along, it changes all that. The ending (phase one of transition) destroys the world as you've known it, and the neutral zone (phase two) leaves you in a strange state of no-longer-this-but-not-yet-that, that feels like some parallel universe where nothing works in familiar ways. (No wonder Goethe says that people don't want to grow!)

The fact is that transition has always been a profound source of personal development, but it has only been in the past several hundred years-and, until recently, only in the western world-that people were left to get through transition on their own. Elsewhere and in other times, there was training to prepare people for the experience and rituals to help them through it.

We aren't likely to be able to recreate such rituals on any but a purely individual scale, but it is useful all the same to understand what bygone peoples received in the way of clarification and support. That understanding can help you to view the difficult times in your life in a very useful way: as un-ritualized points of passage in your developmental path. These would have been places where, in another time and place, there would have been a ritual to help you. But that ritual didn't make something materialize out of thin air. It simply amplified the natural transition process that was going on.

Whether these were coming-of-age rituals, marriages, funerals, or rituals to mark people's passage from the old year to the new year, they started by removing people from their old settings and destroying their old identities. The change of scene was meant to remove the external signal and support systems that kept people in their familiar roles and relationships. The disidentification was done by radically changing the people's appearance: their hair was cut off, their faces were painted a single flat color, and their individualized clothing was replaced by some radically simple garb or by nakedness.

Then there was some ordeal, often a painful one. In its simplest aspect, this was a symbolic

death-the death of the people-that-they-had-been. The old "person" had to die before the new "person" could be born, for this was fundamentally a death-and-rebirth experience. In many ways, modern lives are very different, but we too come to points where we lose the roles or relationships within which we have known ourselves. And while no transition-master changes our visual identity, we certainly come to the place where (as people often say) "I hardly recognize myself any more." In other words, modern life gives us the experiential equivalent of the old rites of passage.

As our experiences naturally recapitulate the first (or ending phase) of transition, so they do in the second (or "neutral zone"[1]) phase. In the old rituals, people were taken out into some wilderness area-a deep forest, a snowfield, a mountain top, a stretch of desert-where they could experience themselves and the world outside the reach of the signal systems that they ordinarily lived with. Out there (and also outside the structure of social time), they were exposed to the visions and voices that the everyday world filters out. This was the experience that the Native Americans called the vision quest, the Australian aboriginal peoples called the walkabout, and other groups practiced as vigils and retreats of various sorts.

This time (or time-out) was sometimes the setting for instruction by tribal elders in more esoteric levels of "reality." These were understandings of the world and life that were more appropriate to their new stage of life than their old views were. Armed with the discoveries and a sense of themselves gained during this time in the wilderness, people-in-transition then returned to their tribal village as "new" and "renewed" people-with new knowledge, a new outlook on life, and a new identity.

In the past, societies prescribed these points at which people were going to need this kind of transition help. Today, such times come along unpredictably. That is, they come along whenever an old reality or a way of seeing the world has come to the end of its usefulness. But we don't recognize these times for what they are. Instead, we see them as situations in which we feel depressed and empty "for no good reason." We may experience such times as situations when an important individual has let us down and left us feeling disillusioned, or when our hitherto reliable ways of dealing with the world have broken down and left us feeling defeated and confused; or they may simply be times when things "fall apart" at home or at work, or when a health problem stops us in our tracks, or when a loved one dies.

Instead of viewing them as calls to let go of our familiar approaches to life, we see such times as occasions when things have inexplicably gone to pieces. We are likely to try to put things back the way they're "supposed to be." Seeing them as problems to be solved, we miss the message that they carry. The message: time to move on, time to die and be reborn, time for transition. Seeing them as problems to be solved, we miss the signal that a developmental opportunity is at hand.

Since Goethe's day, the drive to "be somebody" has grown much stronger. Our society is fluid, and people move into new positions and identities to an extent that would have amazed Goethe's contemporaries. At the same time, our success in solving technical problems has convinced us that everything is a technical problem waiting to be solved. The slower and more indirect path along which transition carries us is one that feels old-fashioned. But it is still the path-the only true path-of growth and renewal.

Note: [1] The term that I use for transition's second phase was first used early in the 20th

century by a Dutch anthropologist named Arnold van Gennep to describe the second or middle phase of the traditional rite of passage. See his book, *Rites of Passage* (1908)

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