

DEALING SUCCESSFULLY WITH PERSONAL TRANSITION

by William Bridges

During the past dozen years, I have worked with more than 5,000 people in transition. Some of these people had changed their lives intentionally, while others were in the grip of forces far beyond their control. Some of their changes appeared to be fortunate ones, while others were unfortunate. Some of these people were changing their lives in far-reaching ways, while others were not even dealing with external changes at all. And, of course, the content of their changes varied immensely: job losses, marriages, health problems, divorces, promotions, retirements, financial setbacks or windfalls, spiritual crises, and so on.

But almost all of these people had one thing in common: they confused the *change* that they were making with the transition they were in. Change happens whenever something starts or stops in our lives - or one thing stops and another starts up in its place. Marriage stops and a separation starts. A job stops and unemployment starts. A position as a lab technician stops and a new one as the lab manager starts. In each case, the circumstances of the person's life are different in some way, and that is a *change*.

Transition, on the other hand, is the psychological process that the person must go through to unplug from his or her old identity and become re-oriented to the new one. *Transition* involves "realities," not just circumstances. It requires the person to leave behind an old life, not just a job or a relationship. Needless to say, transition takes longer than change. The new circumstances may take shape immediately, but the new life, the new reality, the new identity will take months to take form fully.

To make matters more difficult, there is a third factor besides the changing circumstances and the transition process; that is personal *resonance*. Some current situations "resonate" disturbingly because of our past experience with comparable situations. If your parents separated when you were young, the breakup of an adult relationship will stir old fears and resentments that do not exist in someone with a different childhood experience. If your low self-esteem has been propped up with a prestigious position at work, a demotion is likely to hit you much harder than it hits someone whose sense of personal value is not so dependent on their work status.

It has proved useful in working with people in transition to depict these three aspects of their inner and outer life situation with the aid of a triangle. I've come to call it the C - P - R triangle.

Circumstances

Process

Resonance

The *circumstances* are the situational elements that are changing in the person's life, the *process* is the inner transition from the old way of being to the new one, and the *resonance* is private meaning that is triggered in memory by the present event.

These distinctions are important, because people often try to get themselves through a *transition* by planning and managing the circumstances of the *change*. For them a change will have taken place, but internally there has been no transition. I knew such a man years ago, who had been a student at an Ivy college and who now, at the junior college where he was teaching, gave two grades on every paper he returned: one the grade it received, and the other the grade it would have received at his alma mater. This man made the change from the one circumstance to the other all right, but the inner reorientation process that we are calling *transition* did not take place.

Similarly, dealing effectively with the circumstances would not help a person with the way in which they resonated with old and unresolved issues in his or her life. Only dealing with the issues themselves would not do that. The way to deal resonance is through counseling or psychotherapy, just as the way to deal with circumstances is through analysis, planning, and careful management. And the way to deal with the transition process? That is the topic of this paper.

The first thing to understand about transition is that it has three stages or phases: an *ending*, a *neutral zone*, and a *beginning*. The second thing to understand is that the ending comes first, not last. That is the opposite of our everyday way of looking at things and that is why it is so difficult to remember. People in transition are always forgetting that an old life, an old way of being, an old identity has to end before a new one can begin. The man who still gave two grades was having a problem with endings. So is the person who marries three alcoholics in a row - who cannot let go of the self-image and the way of relating to people that keep attracting alcoholics and hiding their real nature until it is too late.

Traditional societies developed a transition-aid that we lack. They had rituals ("rites of passage") which helped to clarify the issues involved and support the person during the transition process. In those rituals the person in transition went through a symbolic death experience to mark the ending we are talking about. This wasn't just hocus-pocus. It represented the psychological truth that letting go of something that is an essential part of our inner world is experienced as a loss of the self we have known. So it is not accidental that

the person in transition often feels as though he or she (or something inside them) is "dying."

Such rituals followed the symbolic death with a time of solitude in the wilderness. Again, we can think of that as a bit of primitive folklore - or, more wisely, can realize that the "wilderness" is just a symbol for the strange "nowhere," that psychological no-man's land that we find ourselves in when we let go of who we were but haven't yet discovered a new identity. This wilderness (which I've come to call the *neutral zone*) is just as real today as it was in the days of passage rituals.

Our culture doesn't have a good way to talk about the neutral zone, and so it is a place where most people feel especially confused - that they are stuck or that they have lost their way. Some people do get stuck and some do take wrong turns, of course, but more people are simply making the invisible inner reorientation, which is what one is meant to do in the neutral zone.

Transition's third phase is the new beginning, the surge of new energy, the new sense of direction, the whole new way-things-are which marks the beginning of a new chapter in our lives. Most people are so relieved that things have "improved" for them that they fail to recognize that the new beginning is simply the natural outcome of the transition process. Not recognizing that, they fail to learn that beginnings happen naturally when (and only when) a real ending has been made and a season spent in the wilderness.

And they try to hurry through the next change and start up something new, only to find that things aren't really any different when they are finished or that in spite of the new circumstances, they feel unplugged and lost. It is important to learn to deal with transition successfully, because change is so frequent in our society that it is sometimes difficult to complete one transition before we are launched into another. And the cost of handling transition badly is high.

- Many prolonged periods of depression result from being unable to get out of the neutral zone.
- Fear of endings and a refusal to let go simply makes us rigid and blocks us off from the neutral creativity that we can discover in the neutral zone.
- Mishandling transition is the source of a good deal of stress - and the physical illnesses and accidents that stress produces.
- Many relationship problems come from the mismatching of two different transition cycles or two different styles of handling transition.
- Many career problems come from the natural endings of old patterns of motivation or valuing.

Transition happens whenever we come to the point in our lives when our old way of dealing with things is no longer adequate to the world we live in or the phase of our lives it is time for. It is ironic but usually true that a *problem* is an old and outlived solution that used to work in our lives, but now needs to end in a transition.

It is important to understand that, because for all the problems associated with it, transition has a vitally positive role to play in our lives. First, transition releases energy that has become locked up in old self-images and in living up to them in spite of the fact that they no longer fit the reality of who we currently are. So, transition produces self-renewal.

Second, transition destroys the old patterns of "reality" that were once useful to us but which now hide things that we need to see. When the old reality disappears, we have a chance to look at things with new eyes and to see possibilities that were invisible before. Transition is, thus, the source of the creativity that we so often long for in our lives. And third, transition is developmental. That is, in letting go of an out-lived world and discovering a new one, we grow. Each reality, each sense of self, is a little more complex and fully developed than the last.

So transition is disruptive, but it is also profoundly positive - at least it can be if it is handled successfully.

Let me offer in closing 25 suggestions for handling transition successfully.

1. **Distinguish the changing circumstances from the process of transition.** The former can be accomplished quickly, but the latter will take months . . . even years.
2. **Distinguish the transition process from any personal resonance it may set off.** The present is significantly different from the past. You have changed in some very important ways. What was then, was then. This is now, and endings, temporary periods of disorientation, and new challenges no longer need be traumatic in the same old way.
3. **Make plans for dealing wisely with the changing circumstances, and seek help if you need it in dealing with the pain that comes from old hurts resonating.** But before you go too far down either the practical or the therapeutic path, consider things from a transitional perspective. Transitions are the way in which we leave behind an old no-longer-adequate reality, gestate a new one during a "season in the wilderness," and reorient our lives around it with a new purpose and new energy.
4. **What is it time for you to let go of now?** Not an external thing, but an inner sense of yourself or others. A dream about the future, a value system or a set of inner rules or taboos. Some way you have had of making meaning in your life? Some way you've had of dealing with problems?

5. **If it feels as though you have suffered a whole cluster of losses or setbacks lately, what is the message?** What is the larger, less tangible thing that you need to let go of?

6. **Whom can you talk to about this?** You need someone. At the very least, write about it in a journal. What does it feel like? What are your worst fantasies about what might happen? Have you ever been through something like this before? What did you do then? What did you later wish you had done then?

7. **How can you celebrate this ending you are experiencing?** What actions or events would give form to its inner meaning to you? Would you want these things to constitute a semi-public ceremony or simply a private ritual?

8. **If you find yourself very fearful about the possible outcomes of your ending - for inner endings do have external outcomes in many cases - do a "worst-case" scenario of what might happen and what you'd do about it.** With each outcome, ask yourself what you'd do in that case.

9. **Remember that you're part of a number of "systems," and that any ending you make is going to affect others.** Don't automatically expect their support, for you are in effect forcing an ending upon them as well. Nor should you treat conflict that may develop with such others as simply an obstacle in your path. It may well help you to articulate the issues and see the implications of how your life is changing. (It may also - heaven forbid - show you where you're just plain, flat-out on the wrong track.)

10. **Not everything ends in an ending, of course.** There will probably be continuities in other areas of your life, and this may be time to strengthen them. If you're changing careers, it's wise to strengthen ties at home. If you're getting a divorce, it's a good idea to make sure that your friends are there for you. It may even be time to go back and pick up an old interest that you haven't pursued in years, something that ties you back to the person you were before you became the one who's making the present ending.

11. **Expect to experience the elements of mourning at the losses you suffer.** Kubler-Ross talks about the typical sequence of Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Despair, and Acceptance. Also typical are Sadness, Anxiety, and Disorientation. Whatever the list, Acceptance is the last step, not the first, and you get to it only after going through the others.

12. **Think about how the present transition fits into the path of your own development.** If you had to give it a title like a chapter title, what would you call this present situation: "Growing up at last"? "Coming to terms with the universe"? "A star is born"? Or what?

13. The emptiness and confusion of the neutral zone is always troublesome and can be terrifying. Recognize it for what it is, however. It is a "time in the wilderness," like the literal wilderness time during the traditional rites of passage. You are out there (or "in there") away from the old, familiar sense of things, letting your old attitudes and behaviors die out and clearing the ground for new ones. Traditional cultures knew that solitude was important during this time, and it still is. Can you give yourself an opportunity for solitude? Think about how to do that.

14. The neutral zone is particularly distressing when you can't afford to take a literal time-out from life to get through it. The kids have to be fed and the reports written and the bills paid. To keep up functioning during this time when you have lost your old inner supports is difficult, but it is helped by providing yourself with temporary arrangements and agreements and schedules to get you through. The old way won't work any more, and this is no time to make long-term promises about a new way. What short-term ways can you think up to get through the coming weeks and months?

15. The neutral zone used to be considered the site of visions and voices. In the Old Testament, the word for "wilderness" is also the word for "sanctuary." The Plains Indians called their journey into the neutral zone a Vision Quest. And this is not just a so-called "primitive" idea. The no-man's-land between what was and what will be is a time when we're most in touch with our creative unconscious and most able to break out of old thought forms and see things in wholly new ways. What can you do to encourage such insight and innovation? You'd also better start keeping some kind of a record of your insights or ideas.

16. You're going to have moments (or days or weeks) of discouragement during this neutral zone phase. You may find yourself idealizing how things used to be and thinking seriously of trying to turn back the clock. That's natural and isn't a sign that you've taken a wrong turn. But it is important to keep a realistic view of the past and its present unworkability. Even if the outcome of the transition is a return to the situation you have left, it is always to a subjectively different situation or to a different relation to the situation. *You* will be different, so *it* will be different too. That old writer was right: you can't go home again.

17. During the neutral zone phase, you may feel that you're hung up on a big rock. Stuck. Unable to go forward or backward. Faced with an insoluble problem. It's like being shut up in a little room with a large beast: There isn't much room to breathe, and you'd do anything to find an unlocked door. Before you use up all your energy trying to devise an escape, turn back toward your grim cell mate and learn all that you can about him. What is this problem? Get to know it inside and out. But don't just study it objectively: let it talk to you in its own words. Really. Imagine that you are striking up a conversation with "the problem." Say things to it. Imagine its replies. Get into the dialogue. Be the problem and speak as it

would. If you can do this, you are sure to learn things about the problem you haven't known before. You may even find out that you are holding on to the problem and keeping it alive.

18. This wilderness time is a good one for thinking what you really want at this point in your life. Not what you used to want, but what you want now. Today. Ask yourself that. Note that some of the things you say you want are really "wishes": "I wish I had \$1,000,000." "I wish I were better looking . . . younger. . . a man." These are sincere wishes, but they require a Fairy God Mother with a wand. They aren't wants. "I want to make some money and live decently for a change." "I want to lose weight . . . get my nose fixed or whatever." Those are things that you could do. People do them all the time. A want motivates you; a wish enervates you. What do you want?

19. As you come out of the neutral zone, you will find things "coming together" in mysterious ways. Things will take shape inside you: goals will become clear, plans will take shape, practical actions will occur to you. You can try to force these things earlier, but they just don't knit together properly until you are ready for them. Externally too, things may come together in strange ways that seem coincidental and accidental. But it's the same process happening. The new chapter of your life is taking form.

When this happens - and again, it can't be rushed, so don't try to force it now if this isn't yet the time - you will do well to begin to structure the process. Keep a record of it. Write down your objectives. Trace the path back from the objective to where you are and figure what you have to do to reach it. Push yourself toward specificity: What do I need to do? What should I do first, and second, and third? What can I do this coming week?" Make lists. This is the time to act.

20. As you begin to explore new territory, outwardly and inwardly, you will find yourself being harangued by old inner voices: you're too dumb, too weak-willed, too headstrong, too selfish, too old or too young to do that. You can't do *that*! Recognize these statements for what they are: old prohibitions that were once intended to keep you from harm, but that have outlived their usefulness. They are all-too-successful childhood limits that were set to keep us from getting run over or ridiculed by the other kids, to keep us from tearing up the neighbor's lawn or injuring the dog.

But they are no longer adequate voices to follow. We need limits and guidance, but we need ones that correspond to present realities. When the old ones appear, just thank them very much for remembering you after all these years, and say that you're doing fine. And if they don't ease off, yell at them a little.

21. One phase of our lives seldom prepares us properly for the next. In fact, it may prepare us very badly. We have to unlearn old things and learn new ones. What do you need to learn to deal successfully with the

new beginning that you face? Transition usually results in a learning project of some sort. Perhaps it is a formal degree program, but more often it is some skill or information we need - perhaps not a way of doing something new, but a way of being a new way. Whatever the case, what do you need to learn now? And what would be the best way to learn that?

22. As the new beginning starts to take shape, you're likely to find that it doesn't fit with your life as you have been living it. Change produces transition, which produces new change. And on and on. One painful part of this line of dominos comes when you realize that you want something which someone else isn't likely to go along with. ("I'd love to move to the country, but my spouse would leave if I did.") Before you toss in the towel or walk out on your spouse (before he or she can walk out on you), do two things:

First, check out the accuracy of your impression. You may be surprised to find that his/her resistance was really in your head. You'd be amazed how often that is the case, so don't dismiss the possibility. *Second*, talk it out with this other person, but don't focus on the positions each of you is taking - you want to, and the other doesn't. Instead, focus on the interests each of you is trying to protect or promote. What's behind the positions? The reason for doing this is that there are always several ways to reach one end, and a little creative thinking may turn up a way that you can both get what you really want.

23. As you move forward into the next phase of your life, look back at the past. A new future is likely to create a new past. To put it the other way around, an "old" past keeps perpetuating itself in a future that is very much like the past. One way to cultivate the future is to look at the past with new eyes. This isn't just a trick way of seeing things either, for the past is basically the story of how you got to this particular present. And when that present begins to change, you need a new story. And a new story will reinforce the present. What about writing your autobiography, or if that is too much, what about spending two hours telling the story of your life into a tape recorder? I can guarantee you'll discover something about yourself in the process.

24. If your new beginning involves something very different that is also very big, you're likely to feel overwhelmed. All your enthusiasm begins to wane and you feel that you're getting nowhere or that it's too hard. Big changes are like that, and the secret is to break them down into small steps. Alcoholics Anonymous, whose members are going through a huge transition, talks about taking just one day at a time: not "giving up drinking," but only "getting through today (or even the next hour) without a drink." Little steps add up. They build confidence. Time is on your side, and the longer you can keep moving, the less likely you are to stall. Set yourself short-range goals that you have a fairly high likelihood of reaching. Make them public. At the same time you're building your own confidence back, you'll be convincing someone else that you're for real.

25. **Finally, see transition realistically for what it is. . . a long process.** Don't confuse it with "change," which can happen overnight. There will be changes along the way, of course, times when you suddenly discover that a difficult thing is much easier, that an old feeling isn't bothering you any more, that you really do know where you are going at last. But those are outcomes of the transition process, and that process takes time.

As they say, "It takes nine months to have a baby, no matter how many men you put on the job." So give yourself a break. Don't expect miracle cures and don't blame yourself when they don't materialize. Don't hold yourself to some high ideal of production or efficiency during transition either. Those will come later.

Good luck. And keep an eye out for others in transition. They need your support, and you need theirs. Transition is, in fact, an unritualized passage experience and we're all the initiates. A deep bond can develop between initiates, for they know something that everyone else may be trying to forget. They know that this big thing called "reality" is actually fairly flimsy, and that when our lives change radically and dramatically, reality can come apart and leave us out in the cold wind, wishing we had someone to talk to. We don't have initiation masters any more. So we've got to help each other.