

RESOLUTIONS AND TRANSITIONS

Many of us still welcome in the new year with a resolution or two (or twenty). Often, it's a matter of losing weight and exercise or shedding a difficult habit. Sometimes, though, we can set higher, more personally profound, goals that may initiate a sea change in our lives. What better time, then, to talk about a book that has guided me through my most important adult life changes - *Transitions* by William Bridges.

I love this book, it's as simple as that. Written almost 25 years ago, it remains a classic and I have recommended it to scores of clients and friends who are engaged in a life transforming change - be it a divorce, career shift, illness or first baby.

Bridges was a successful and long-tenured literature professor at Mills College in Oakland, California. In the '70's he left the security of this position and embarked on a massive career and life shift with his wife and children. Eventually, he found himself lecturing and running workshops for people engaged in all manner of transitions and the book was a natural product of his years of observation of his own and others' processes.

Major change is hard. Many of us cling to our present security, with it's comfortable familiarity, despite the diminishing rewards - and even pain - in doing so. Part of this pain lies in the deeply disconcerting mystery of the process. This book serves as a guide.

Bridges describes three discrete (though sometimes blending) stages in the transition process: Ending; The Neutral Zone and New Beginning. He notes at the outset that many find his starting with the end to be counter-intuitive. We are such an active, forward thinking lot, that change means the future and many in his workshops initially balked at the suggestion that the first step is really the ending of the old way.

There are four stages in the ending process: Disengagement, Dis-identification, Disenchantment, and Disorientation. Disengagement involves the acknowledgment that ties are loosening between ourselves and present roles. This realization may come in a shock, as change is foisted upon us by external choice - our spouse leaves us; we are fired or we receive an unanticipated promotion embellished with a compulsory relocation. Other times, it dawns on us - this realization that we must change but with the end-point dim or imperceptible. The key, of course, is the shift, and with this shift comes the loss of our old understanding of who we are. "I'm this person's wife." "I'm a partner with Rehnquist Thomas." Even the more generic "I'm always a winner." In Bridges' words, "One way or another, most people in transition have the experience of not being quite sure who they are anymore...disidentification is really the inner side of the disengagement process."

Disenchantment ("dis-enchantment") involves the dawning acceptance that the reality in which we blindly trusted is in some crucial respect false. "The lifetime contains a long chain of disenchantments, many small and a few large: lovers who proved unfaithful, leaders who were corrupt, idols who turned out to be petty and dull, organizations that betrayed your trust. Worst of all, there were times when you yourself turned out to be what you said and even believed that you were not. Disenchantment, you can quickly discover, is a recurrent experience throughout the lifetime of anyone who has the courage and trust to believe in the first place." As Bridges further teaches, "The disenchantment experience is the signal that the time has come to look below the surface of what has been thought to be so."

Finally, there is disorientation. Before, we were pointed in a comfortable, well defined direction. Suddenly our orientation is askew. We feel like a vessel bobbing on the water without compass or star sightings. Predictably, our goals no longer hold and there is nothing to take their place.

People in transition need to go through the painful - but crucial - step of acknowledging the end of a life we have known. This, of course, is why so many of us do not pursue the evolution of our transition. The pain of ending, particularly the dis-identification and disorientation stages, are just not tolerable.

These stages of ending quite naturally flow into the middle passage, Bridge's "Neutral Zone." It has been summarized by one source as: "A confusing in-between state, when people are no longer who and where they were, but are not yet who and where they're going to be."

Imagine yourself crossing a knifing icy stream in the cascades by stepping out onto a large rock - only imagine yourself enveloped in fog so you're not sure where you're going.. You leave one shore and you may feel impelled to go vaulting uneasily from rock to rock until hopefully, eventually, you arrive at the other side. All is instability and there is no clear direction. After the leap of ending is this middle passage of uncertainty. "What am I doing? Where am I going? Why did I do this?" In divorce, this is the passage that Abigail Trafford calls Crazy Time in her excellent and healing book of that name.

Bridges acknowledges, and has the deepest compassion for, those engaged in the Neutral Zone. His counsel is simple. Be still. Find solitude in the midst of our world which insistently demands our attention. Some will carve this time out of the day to sit quietly and think - or journal; some might go for a swim or run. The point is that we reject the demand to respond, to act, to decide. Only through this stillness can we experience the renewal that will lead us to, and through, the final stage of New Beginning.

This final stage usually won't commence with an epiphany, although this certainly could happen. More likely we sense this New Beginning as a whisper, a hint of direction or meaning. Again, Bridges: "The lesson in all such experiences is that when we are ready to make a beginning, we will shortly find an opportunity. The transition process involves an inner realignment and a renewal of energy, both of which depend on immersion in the chaos of the neutral zone....much as we long for external signs that point the way to the future, we must settle for inner signals that alert us to the proximity of new beginnings...The first hint may take the form of either an inner idea or of an external opportunity, but its hallmark is not a logical sign of validity but a resonance that it sets up in us."

Perhaps the most difficult element of transition for lawyers is that in transition, we cannot have a preconceived idea of where we will end up. It's a funny thing about our world. If we fight our natural, intended direction we often will experience frustration and a sense of stalemate. However, if we are still, and listen to our deepest intention and purpose, opportunities will knock endlessly. That's when the whole process really does seem like magic and we might wonder, "Is somebody out there taking care of me?"

So Happy New Year. If you, like me, are committed to sweating off the pounds that a few months of sloth have added to the boyish figure, I'll see you in the gym. If, however, you are engaged in a life shift, I tip my hat to your courage, recommend a book by William Bridges and hope I can hear about your journey some day.