

Living in the Neutral Zone

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Have you ever lived in “the neutral zone”?

I think you have!

“The neutral zone” is a term I learned in the works of William Bridges, author of several books on life transitions. He picked up this concept from a Dutch anthropologist, Arnold van Gennep, who published in 1909 *Rites of Passage*, a study of non-Western rituals used by tribal groups to negotiate the turning points in their lives.

The neutral zone is the bridge between the ending of one phase of life and the beginning of another, whether that change be caused by the death of a loved one, an engagement or marriage, a move, the end of a relationship or endeavor, or an illness. Many transitions are more subtle, as one may let go of an old habit or way of being, while remaining in the same external situation.

The neutral zone is most often a place of great turbulence – as in “The Fault Line” poem shared earlier by Jane. The neutral zone, that place between ending and beginning, may feel like the early tremors of an earthquake, the fault line splitting beneath your feet, the shelves spilling out, the very ground on which you stand unsteady and dangerous.

Yet the neutral zone can also be a place of surprising calm and clarity, a stillness, like the eye of a hurricane.

Some years ago, I left town for a day to talk with a friend regarding a major transition that seemed to be underway. I drove home beginning to grieve the loss

of something very important to me. When I returned to my apartment, I found the door unlocked. Inside, my bed had been upturned, my clothes drawers emptied, and my television, VCR, and computer had been taken. While I was coming to terms with an ending in my life, my apartment was being burglarized. Enter the Neutral Zone!

What I remember most about that time is not the sense of violation I felt, though that was strong, and persisted for some time, but the moment of calm amidst the chaos, standing in my kitchen as I waited for the police. Amid my shock, fear, and anger, for a few moments time seemed to slow down, and I knew everything would be OK; I knew everything *was* OK.

This is part of living in the neutral zone: finding a stillness, a moment of peace that one may feel when experiencing a loss by circumstance or choice. A freedom, a sense of being and self much deeper than one's attachment to the object of the loss: yes, I've lost these things, this endeavor, this relationship, this dream. And yes, I'll survive – and maybe even better than that. Perhaps in these losses is a new beginning, a new self emerging.

Florida Scott-Maxwell (as quoted in *The Way of Transition*):

Life does not accommodate you; it shatters you...

Every seed destroys its container or else there would be no fruition.

When I leave this ministry, I will not be taking up a new one. I will be focusing on family and home, while gradually discerning next steps in my work life, which may or may not involve organized religion. I am choosing an extended neutral zone, setting aside the role that has defined me for most of my adult life.

You, too, will be entering a neutral zone, an interim ministry of one or two years. I hope this time will be one of clarity and grace for you. And we together have a neutral zone between my resignation and my departure. I am stepping back from any decision making related to governance, finance, future directions. I met yesterday with the Board, Committee on Congregational Ministry, and the District Executive to clarify this and other matters. I left this meeting with the sense that my last few months here would make for a good closure, with time not only for processing what happened, but also for thanks and appreciations.

In this departure period, I will remain your minister while gradually letting go of my role with you and all that came with it. The quality of the closing of one ministry will be a great determinant of the quality of the next ministry, for congregations and for ministers. I can speak to this spiritual truth from my own experience of prior endings. What is becoming clearer to me now is the role this transition may play in future transitions of many sorts. Transitioning well in one part of one's life may aid other transitions. Tibetan Buddhism teaches that one of the best ways to prepare for death is to tend to the little deaths throughout one's life.

In our story for all ages, a parable from the Mediterranean called "Letting Go," a man is refused entry into heaven as he refuses to let go of a handful of earth. From this one piece of information about the man, we can make an educated guess about how he handled other transitions in his life: by holding on to the past. We all have our transition strategies, or at least habits: charge through, run away, deny change or transitions. Most of us hold on in some way. If this man had made an intentional practice of letting go in the many small transitions in his life, he

would have been better prepared to let go at the end of his life. So I know that the intentionality and care I bring to my closure with you will have an effect not only on my future professional ventures and your ministries, but also on the quality of my future transitions of all sorts, and possibly yours as well, depending on the intentionality and care you bring to it.

On a lighter note, I'll share with you one of my long-term strategies for coping with change: distraction. During my last ending of a ministry, six years in Rhode Island, I finally started watching episodes of the TV show "Lost" lent to me by my nephew, Jeff. The first year of Lost included very interesting dramatizations of how people deal with change and transition. In particular, the early episodes illustrate the difference between change and transition so emphasized in William Bridges' work.

The show begins with its characters finding themselves on a tropical island after their plane crashed onto the beach. The plane crash is what Bridges calls a "change." One hour, you're flying from Australia to Los Angeles. The next, you're marooned on a beach with about fifty strangers, many wounded, and the bodies of those who did not survive. How the characters adapt to this change is what Bridges calls "transition." Some adjust more quickly than others. The first character, Jack, wakes in a jungle, gradually remembers the crash and runs to the beach, where he immediately tends to the wounded. He seems to have transitioned remarkably quickly. Not really. Jack is a surgeon, and tending to the wounded is always what Jack has done. He has carried over parts of his former self, putting them to good use. But this does not mean he has transitioned. He passes on an opportunity for transition when he declines an invitation to preside over or even participate in a funeral service for those who died in the crash. Returning to the

States from Australia with the body of his father, Jack is traveling literally with his dead father but has not yet done the soul-work of transition following his death. That, of course, comes in a later episode.

A young woman named Shannon resists transition to an almost comical degree, tanning herself on the beach, asking her brother why he bothers with so much activity when the rescuers will be there any hour. She continues in this vein for over a week.

Charlie, played by the same actor who portrayed Merry the hobbit in the Lord of the Rings movies, is not a natural hero, leader, or adventurer, yet he volunteers to join a dangerous mission to seek out the cabin of the airplane, believed to be inland. His motive for this mission turns out to be most un-hobbit-like, however, as he climbs over dead bodies in the plane to get to the bathroom, where he reaches into the latrine to recover his “precious”: a bag of heroine. I can hardly imagine a stronger image of a character resisting transition than Charlie going back to the plane, and even to the toilet, to recover his drugs. Charlie has gone through a tremendous change but not yet transitioned at all. Later I noticed a tattoo on his arm: “Living is easy with eyes closed.” In the early episodes, Charlie takes every opportunity to mention that he was a bassist and backup vocalist in a popular band, inconsequential skills on this island. He has one of the most difficult transitions, giving up a rock-star identity, a drug addiction, and a habit of living with eyes closed.

William Bridges writes, “Transition does not require that you reject or deny the importance of your old life, just that you let go of it.” We can resist this letting go in myriad ways, embracing change while eschewing true transition. People who jump from relationship to relationship or from job to job or from obsession to

another may appear to be liberated and fearless in their embrace of change, but most often these external changes are made to avoid an inner transition from one way of being to another, to avoid, for instance, growing up. To make a true transition, rather than jump into the next superficial change, one must be willing to enter the disorientation of the neutral zone, the place of unknowing, where the ground is shifting and strength is found only in the “tensile strands of love” (from “Fault Line” by Robert Walsh). Each transition is a little like adolescence, where we’re part kid, part teenager, and part adult, and nobody knows (least of all ourselves) which self will emerge in a given situation.

The magical nature of the island in the “Lost” series resonates because there is something other-worldly about the Neutral Zone. When we feel broken up in a time of true transition, the world looks different, and we may find new and surprising connections. When you’re lost, you notice your surroundings better than when you know where you’re going. Everything is worth observing.

In the Neutral Zone, every environment is new, even familiar ones, because *you* have changed. The world may seem magical. You may discover that you have changed for some time without being aware of it.

Emerson writes,

Every man’s condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries which he would make; he lives it as life before he perceives it as truth.

In the Neutral Zone of transition, we may see the truth we have begun living. To discover ourselves anew in this way is perhaps the greatest adventure, though often frightening as adventures tend to be. Just as Jesus went to the desert and

Buddha sat under the Bodi tree, we enter the Neutral Zone of transition when we dare to let go of an old self. It's an uncomfortable place that we may rather avoid or charge through or deny, but when we enter the desert, we may understand why in Hebrew the word for "wilderness" is the same word for "sanctuary" – the place of meeting God.

Please join with me in the spirit of prayer.

Great Mystery,

Earthquake, shaking our foundations;

Stillness amidst chaos, timeless and reassuring;

Force of life, inviting growth, moment to moment,

within us, among us, and beyond us,

We turn to you now.

Thank you for making us who we are.

May we remember that we became who we are only by shedding the skin
of an old self.

May we notice all around us that growth, transition, and decay
are the constants of life, that everything changes, everything dies.

Help us stop and witness transition in the dawn, in dusk, in every little change in the day, in the
season, in the lives and bodies of those near us, and in ourselves.

Help us see in each end a beginning, and in each beginning, an end.

May our growth be in the service of the growth of others,
and in celebration of your wondrous beauty.

Amen.