

Transitions: Why Is It So Tough to Get Through Them?

BY ANGELLA NAZARIAN

We've recently started a new semester and year and hundreds of wide-eyed freshman girls are crisscrossing UCLA's grounds on their way to classes or meetings for the student groups they've just joined or gatherings with new friends. I take this road often, and each semester I am reminded of when I was once one of those girls. Nervous and excited, I found myself among thousands of people at a huge university, and I spent most of my first quarter figuring out what I was going to make of myself in this new place.

Last week, when I was driving through campus, I asked myself how did the time go by? How can it be that I can still feel so close to that person I was then and yet have a child that is literally the age of the girls that I see before me?

It feels as if change—or life for that matter—sweeps over us whether we are prepared or not.

Research indicates that every seven years, we go through some type of transformation. Moving out, getting a new job, and marriage are big markers in our life. At around age thirty, we go through another major upheaval when we reassess our commitments. Of course, everyone has heard of the infamous mid-life crisis and its seismic changes. However, the big misconception is that once we get over the mid-life years, our lives become an unbroken plane of constancy. This is not so.

Transitions are simply the way in which our life unfolds, where we go through a series of expansions and contractions.

So if changes and transitions take place at every juncture of our lives, why is it so difficult to accept it?

Change, in its essence, initiates a process of saying goodbye to a part of our lives. And that process triggers a host of responses—some good and some that will delay or inhibit our growth.

It's useful to ask ourselves what were our experiences in endings before? How we dealt with childhood transitions and changes may give us insight into how we deal with transitions today. When something in our life comes to an end, old coping mechanisms automatically reactivate, and we are dealing with some of our residual feelings and responses from an earlier experience.

For some, change is met with resistance. It triggers old patterns of fear of the unknown, confusion, and insecurity. If we don't allow ourselves to process these feelings while making transitions, our unfinished business will reappear later. And we all have had our share of feeling like we are spinning our wheels over and over again.

We resist transition because it has to do more with our sense of self than the external change. In order for the transition process to take place, we are forced to give up our old pattern of living, our

old mindsets, and the ways we are used to responding to others and ourselves. We find ourselves in an unknown territory that William Bridges, in his bestselling book *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*, calls "the neutral zone."

The neutral zone is a place to work through because it's a place of emptiness, inactivity, or restlessness.

If we process what we find there, it prepares us for new growth and activities. It becomes a source of renewed energy and a better sense of whom we will be going forward. It is a place where we learn to see ourselves with new eyes and become inspired to dream new dreams.

This can be the scariest place for those who don't deal with transitions easily because it's a place of risk and opportunity. It changes relationships; it challenges the status quo, and it leads you to uncharted territory. Our first instinct is to make this distress more comfortable for ourselves. We may revert back to the safety of the way things used to be or jump into some new project, activity, or relationship to avoid this awkward in-between stage. But there's truth to that saying, "You have to be lost enough to find yourself." As much as we wish we could whizz through this awkward in-between period, we can't, and it may last weeks or months or even years.

A Rabbi once said one of the wisest things to my son on the day of his Bar Mitzvah, which marks a child's entry into adulthood. He put a hand on his shoulder and looked in his eye and said, "Remember, young man, life is about beginnings. Yes, beginnings. You will have many beginnings such as this in your life." (To tell you the truth, I thought I needed to hear that message more than him!)

Yes, beginnings too are markers in our journey. It's important to become aware of the ways in which we personally begin new stages in our lives. Is it through relationships, new projects, or does a new attitude first emerge? For some, there may be a flash of an idea or an inspiration or an image that tickles us or calls us from a deep place inside.

What works against us is that we often buy into the idea that we should keep the same dreams and aspirations that we had when we were younger. The natural developmental pattern is not for people to keep the same dreams but to relinquish old dreams and generate new ones throughout their lives. Many of us do not come into our own until we are well into our forties or fifties. Consider Abraham Lincoln, Ghandi, Eleanor Roosevelt, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Walt Whitman: There is a long list of famous people who began anew in the midst of adult life transition. So why not us?

I was once asked in an interview what would I do differently if I had to start over. I have started over many times. I went from teaching at the university to facilitating women's groups and then became a writer and speaker. What would I do differently? My answer was not about a change in activity, but a change in attitude. I would have been kinder and more patient with myself. I would have given myself more completely to whatever I was doing, even if it turned out to be a false start. I have come to realize that the degree to which we give ourselves to people, to life, and to its ensuing changes, the more fully we embrace our own unique journey.